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Utah State University

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GOING SOLO WITH ROALD DAHL:

LIFE REWRITTEN THROUGH MEMORY

by

Jeannine Huenemann

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies
(Folklore)

Approved:

_____	_____
Dr. Patricia Gantt Major Professor	Dr. Christie Fox Committee Member
_____	_____
Dr. Lisa Gabbert Committee Member	Dr. Mark R. McLellan Vice President for Research and Dean of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2011

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ABSTRACT

Going Solo with Roald Dahl:

Life Rewritten Through Memory

by

Jeannine Huenemann, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2011

Major Professor: Pat Gantt
Department: English

Roald Dahl does not easily fit into a category as a writer, contributing fiction and nonfiction to both children and adult audiences. Faced with this ambiguity, the literary community has mostly ignored his contributions since he is mainly viewed as a children's author. Late in life, Dahl created two autobiographies, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984), and *Going Solo (1986),* as venues for sharing his many embellished, personal stories. This thesis focuses on *Going Solo,* the second of these two books which explores Dahl's three-year departure from England, including his enlistment in the Royal Air Force during World War II. During this same time period, he wrote 126 personal letters and telegrams to his family. He had experienced much change in his life during the nearly fifty-year gap from when the letters were written to when he crafted *Going Solo* for a more general audience. By comparing this personal correspondence to *Going Solo,* it is possible to see how memory and self-selection permitted the author to craft a personal narrative interested as much in reconstructing his public persona as recounting true events from his past.

This thesis asserts that Dahl does not rely exclusively on his letters when reconstructing the narrative and instead inserts himself into a larger historical narrative. Dahl used *Going Solo* to point to the locations where his personal narrative collides with history and emotions. This is particularly true in the last half of the book where he comes to rely on historical touchstones. It is full of places and people which evoke memories and strong feelings for him. Dahl also relied on techniques and motifs found in folktales, features that make his work of particular interest to folklorists. The final chapter offers an examination of these techniques used in *The BFG*, Dahl's most autobiographical work of children's literature, written only four years prior to *Going Solo*. By paying closer attention to his methodology, we gain a clearer understanding of how folklore functions in the development of literary personal narrative.

(100 pages)

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Jeannine Huenemann

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Last spring I followed in Roald Dahl's footsteps for a short time, living in Buckinghamshire England, commuting to the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre in Great Missenden England, and reading personal letters and other materials collected in Dahl's archive. When the archive closed each afternoon, I ventured out into the community to experience the village in which Dahl lived for nearly half his life. Along a narrow, tree-lined road above the village, I found Gipsy House, the only place he called home. He purchased the home with his mother's help in the 1950s because of its proximity to her own place. It was here that he lived, raised his five children, gardened, and wrote until his death in 1990. His second wife, Felicity, still lives in the home, tending the lovely gardens that surround it. I circled the property at a respectful distance and finally found a small, overgrown foot path leading past the front of the house. From this vantage point I discovered two familiar landmarks: Dahl's writing hut, where he labored each day, and the sky-blue gypsy wagon shared by Danny and his father in *Danny Champion of the World* (1975).

Soon my path converged with a wider trail leading to the ominously dark beech woods that Dahl often wrote about in stories such as *The Minpins*. Two girls dressed in school uniforms weaved their way towards me just as if he had written them into my story. The girls, Kate and Ashley, lived in the village of Great Missenden and were excited to add to my knowledge of Dahl. They became my guides, walking me through the winding streets of town towards the cemetery across the bluff. As they left, they told me to follow the giant footsteps which would lead me to Dahl's grave. I followed the giant's footsteps and found

the grave marker surrounded by pennies, pencils, chocolate, a magical medicine bottle, and many, many onions. The onions were a mystery until I learned much later that Dahl loved onions, which he grew for beauty and even ate raw (R. Dahl and F. Dahl 1996, 29). Like the onions, Roald Dahl himself evokes strong feelings from fans and foes alike, layered in complexity and complications.

Roald Dahl does not easily fit into a category as a writer. Over his lifetime, he wrote for both children and adults, but he is best known for his contributions to children's literature. While the area of children's literature is expanding at a phenomenal rate, respect paid to authors in this genre is late in coming. It is as if an author's significance were measured in accordance to the height and wealth of their audience. So, Dahl has received very little scholarly attention aside from the negative literary criticisms from some librarians and children's literature journals before his death.

To gain a more accurate picture of Dahl's popularity, all one has to do is go to into any classroom and mention Roald Dahl. Nearly all the students know of him and have read or seen his work in movies. As a response to my interest in Dahl, I have found that people either love him or hate him but they always know of him. Furthermore, knowledge of his writing is not restricted to younger generations but extends to include all those who spend time with this group. My introduction to Dahl's unique style and voice came by reading his work aloud at bedtime to my children. His stories filled the room with magical adventures, child-heroes, scary villains, and happy endings. We visited the land of people-eating giants, traveled in gypsy wagons and giant peaches, and met all sorts of famous and interesting

people along the way. Reading his books led me to wonder what the man behind the books could be like, and what life could produce such amazing tales.

Recognition and fame came early in Dahl's career as he became known for his macabre adult fiction. By the time he was in his thirties, his work appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, Ladies Home Journal*, and *Collier's*. His first book for children was *The Gremlin*s, which came out in the 1940s. But his more popular books, including *James and the Giant Peach, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,* and *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, were all written in the 1960s after he became a parent. He was known in the U.S. beginning in the 1940s, but his fame did not spread to Britain until much later. It was not until the mid-1970s that Dahl began giving his English publishers the chance to bring out the first editions of his works (West 1992, ix). Even so, by the end of his life, an average of one in three British children bought or received a Dahl book every year (Nicholson 2000, 309). Labeled "the nation's favourite modern children's author," he placed first in polls in the U.K. in 2000 (Maynard and McKnight 2002, 154), surpassing even J.K. Rowling for a time. His fame today is still undeniable with adaptations of his writing and his life receiving at least as much attention as they did when he was alive.

At the time of Dahl's death, he was included in the ranks of the world's best-selling contemporary fiction authors. Sixteen years later, on the day that he would have turned 90, *BBC News* estimated that over 100 million of his books had been sold (*BBC News* 2006). Around this same time, both the abridged and unabridged versions of his most famous book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were listed as bestselling children's paperback books (*New York Times* 2005). Dahl's life continues to be the subject of speculation and intrigue in recent biographies such as *The Irregulars: Roald Dahl and the British Spy Ring in Wartime*

Washington by Jennet Conant, to *Storyteller: The Authorized Biography of Roald Dahl* by Donald Sturrock. But while public interest in his life grows, his work has received very little scholarly attention, and almost none from the discipline of folklore.

First and foremost, Dahl is a storyteller. After reading his stories for children, visiting his grave, and reading his personal letters, I wanted to find an example of his writing that could be better analyzed using his letters. This led me to the two autobiographies Dahl wrote during his lifetime: *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984) and *Going Solo (1986,* which covers the period from childhood through his early adult years. With a well-developed voice and forty years of reflection, he created these books as venues for sharing his many embellished, personal stories. *Boy* focuses on Dahl's childhood and was written for a younger audience. *Going Solo* follows *Boy* chronologically and was written for more mature readers. It takes place over the span of three years, starting in 1938, exploring Dahl's departure from England to work for Shell Oil Company in Africa, his enlistment in the Royal Air Force, and his eventual medical discharge and return to England. Dahl was a prolific letter writer and wrote 126 personal letters and telegrams to his family over this time period. Because Dahl is a storyteller, much of his narrative in *Going Solo* contains subject matter deeply rooted in the dynamics of storytelling. This thesis will examine how Dahl's stories are full of storytelling traditions by using his personal letters and writing for children to inform the reading of *Going Solo.*

As I read *Going Solo,* I am astonished by the many universal themes which emerge. The book begins with Dahl's ritualistic rite of passage. He leaves home at twenty-two on a passenger ship full of strangers bound for Tanzania to work at an outpost of Shell Oil

Petroleum Company. The strangeness of the ships' passengers becomes the basis for character studies as he explores the oddness of this segment of empire builders. Upon his arrival in Dar es Salaam, he finds a life which is beautiful and strikingly different from anything he has ever experienced. Being with other foreigners in a completely foreign place seemed to make him truly happy for the first time in his life. It has been pointed out by scholar Mark West that Dahl saw himself as an outsider throughout his childhood because of his strong ties to his Norwegian ancestry (West 1992, 2). His narrative style is full of digressions as he presents details of his life intermingled with things that interest him. Letters to his family written during this same period reflect a similar style. Differences appear in his wartime recollections which contain memories missing from his weekly letters home. It is here that we see the desire of a mature writer to mark the important places in his life and to try to fix the past. The last chapter of *Going Solo* shows Dahl as a more mature individual, having suffered many trials, desperate to return home to England and the open arms of his waiting mother.

This thesis will offer an analysis of *Going Solo*, using personal letters and other literary works written by Dahl. By comparing Dahl's personal letters to his autobiography, *Going Solo*, it is possible to see how memory and self-selection permitted him to craft a personal narrative interested as much in reconstructing his public persona as recounting true events from his past. In the final and most lengthy section, in fact, Dahl does not rely on surviving letters and instead inserts himself into a larger historical narrative. He relies on techniques and motifs of folktales, a feature that makes his work of particular interest to

folklorists. By paying closer attention to his methodology, we gain a clearer understanding of how folklore functions in the development of literary personal narrative.

Chapter II introduces Dahl as a popular author, explores major events in his life, and provides insight into his personal motivation for writing *Going Solo*. Chapter III will examine how the narrative found in *Going Solo* and Dahl's personal letters contain themes and patterns that contribute to the storytelling tradition. Chapters IV and V look at how Dahl uses rite of passage, character studies, and humor in the first half of *Going Solo*, as compared to his letters, to tell his story. Chapters VI and VII provides further comparisons between *Going Solo* and Dahl's letters in order to expose specific story selections and exclusions, including the effect these choices have on reader's image of him. Additionally, Chapter VII demonstrates how Dahl re-wrote the story of his crash and discusses what may have motivated his revision of the episode.

The final chapters of the thesis depart from the chronological storyline of *Going Solo*, and discuss how Dahl's work fits into a storytelling tradition. It will show examples of how memories and experiences in personal narrative are important in folklore analysis. Chapter VIII introduces *Going Solo* as a narrative of landscape, describing how the author's interest in photography influence his sense of place created through time and memory. Dahl's choice to return and tell stories from the war demonstrates one of the major places where his life has experienced intense emotions. Chapter IX evaluates Dahl's contribution to folklore by using *The BFG* (1982) to examine how his skills as a storyteller influenced his children's books. *The BFG* was chosen for the autobiographical nature of the characters and settings, and because it was written only four years prior to *Going Solo.* The thesis concludes by

demonstrating why Dahl's writing is worthy of our attention. His writing is already fast becoming part of the literary legacy for further generations. Furthermore, this thesis can serve as a model demonstrates folkloric influence on literary works and personal letters, especially in the area of children's literature. It shows how personal information about an author can help scholars gain a more complete picture of influences and motivations found in the writing. By examining the issue of memory and its importance to the storytelling tradition, this thesis might be applied fruitfully by folklorists, and others, to other writers' work.

CHAPTER II

DAHL'S POPULARITY AND LIFE HISTORY

Dahl was born in Wales in 1916 to Harald Dahl and Sofie Magdalene Hesselberg, in Llandaff, a village just outside of Cardiff.[1] Because both his parents were from Norway, Norwegian was the primary language spoken at home. He was the only son among the five children born during six years of marriage. Roald was only three his oldest sister Astri died. Father Harald died within the same year of pneumonia and heartbreak after losing his beloved daughter. His mother Sofie was left alone to raise the four children as well as two step-children from Harald's previous marriage. As an outsider to the country, language, and landscape that surrounded her, it is surprising that she didn't return to Norway. Perhaps it was only her commitment to her husband's wishes to have their children educated in English schools (Treglown 1994, 2) that kept her on the continent.

As her only son, Roald displayed a keen attachment to his mother and was nicknamed "Apple" by his sisters for being "the apple of his mother's eye" (Treglown 1994, 13). He appropriated the name and signature "Boy" in his early letters home, which he later used as the title for his first autobiography. For her part, she returned this affection by hanging on to his every word—even literally, as she retained 916 of his letters to her. Roald began writing weekly letters home at age nine, as required for assignments, which were graded for allocution and content by the headmaster of St. Peter's Preparatory School (Dahl 1984, 82).

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[1] Biographical information is compiled from numerous sources including *Roald and Pat* (Farrell 1969), *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (Dahl 1984), *Going Solo* (Dahl 1986), *As I am: An Autobiography / Patricia Neal* (Neal and Deneut 1988), *Roald Dahl* (West 1992), *Roald Dahl, A Biography* (Treglown 1994), *Patricia Neal: An Unquiet Life* (Shearer 2006), and *Storyteller the Authorized Biography* (Sturrock 2010).

Occasionally letters were written to one of his sisters, but mostly they went to his mother, who saved them all.

Letters written throughout Dahl's life became much more than simple writing assignments, contributing greatly to his growth as an individual. Each letter followed a pattern, expressing first his needs in the area of material possessions, followed by items of interest that fulfilled his emotional and creative needs. The importance of this correspondence can also be measured by the strong bond it formed between mother and son, and brother and sisters. After starting at St. Peter's, Dahl was away from home from age nine to eighteen, except for summer break, which was spent in Norway. Letter writing allowed him to maintain a warm and intimate relationship with his loved ones. Many playful observations, anecdotes, and stories found in his literary works can be traced to the voice and vision found in these letters. Even as a child, his natural ability to include humor, dialogue, and fabrication of facts were evident.

Why did Dahl choose to focus his two autobiographies on his adolescence through young adult years? To answer this question, I would like to introduce a brief biography emphasizing the many possible directions his autobiographies could have taken. Dahl led an exciting life after flying for the Royal Air Force. He was transferred to Washington D.C. to serve as a flight attaché for the British Embassy. Since this was in the 1940s and his writing career was just taking off, this placed him in some exciting times as he divided his energy between New York, Hollywood, and London. In *The Irregulars: Roald Dahl and the British Spy Ring in Wartime Washington*, Jennet Conant suggests that Dahl, along with Ian Fleming, was recruited to push the British cause by befriending and spying on the Americans from the

inside. She calls them the “blue-eyed social butterflies, meant to use their charm and guile to feel out what the other side was thinking” (Conant 2008, 98). After his fame as a writer was established in the U.S., he used it to get to know famous and powerful Americans.

In 1942, author C. S. Forester recommended Dahl’s short story “Shot Down Over Libya” for publication in the *Saturday Evening Post* (Sturrock 2010, 169). The very next year, *The Gremlins* (2006), his first book for children was published and caught attention of Walt Disney, who purchased the rights. This book garnered the public’s attention resulting in an invitation from Eleanor Roosevelt to visit the White House and the Roosevelt’s private residence in upstate New York (Sturrock 2010, 203). Disney Studios never made *The Gremlins* into a movie, but this connection to Disney became Dahl’s golden ticket into the Hollywood celebrity scene where he met many famous actors. Back in New York at a party hosted by American playwright Lillian Hellman, Dahl met Patricia Neal (Shearer 2006, 146), an actor who would later become his wife and the mother of his five children.

Dahl and Neal were married in 1953. In hopes that they would soon settle in England, Dahl’s mother helped the couple purchase a cottage near her home (Sturrock 2010, 338). The property, renamed Gipsy house, included six acres of land and an orchard, and was less than an hour’s train ride from London. But at the time, both their careers kept them in New York. Neal had later said of the union that she married Dahl not for love, but for the beautiful children they might have together (Neal and Deneut 1988, 160). It came as no surprise that daughter Olivia was born within the first two years of their marriage. Tessa and Theo soon followed. It was while still living in New York in 1960, the first of three family tragedies occurred when four month old Theo was hit by a taxi and thrown from his carriage. Theo

lived, surviving numerous near-death episodes caused by the accident. Dahl, responding to numerous setbacks to his son's health, spearheaded the creation of the Dahl-Wade-Till valve (Sturrock 2010, 375), which is still used in some form today for releasing fluid pressure in the brain.

After moving his family to the safety of their home in England, tragedy struck a second time when seven year old Olivia died from measles encephalitis. A third tragedy centered on Patricia as she suffered multiple strokes resulting in a 21-day coma while pregnant with her fifth child. After intense rehabilitation orchestrated by Dahl, she delivered Lucy, a healthy baby. Neal recovered her health, speech, and eventually her career. Throughout each of these three tragedies, Dahl's mother remained a steadfast source of strength and comfort for him (Sturrock 2010, 452). She was always at hand when needed, either by physical proximity, phone, or by letter until her death.

Sofie Dahl's death in 1967 came at a time when her son was confined to an Oxford hospital after complications from with one of his many back surgeries (Sturrock 2010, 451). It fell on the fifth anniversary of his daughter Olivia's death. Due to his poor health, Dahl was not even able to attend her funeral or to properly mourn her passing. When he finally recovered and returned home, bundles of letters he had written to her, neatly bound with green tape (Dahl 1984, 82) were waiting for him as evidence of her love and devotion. Her death marked a turning point in his own life: the end of his boyhood and loss of his favored muse. It was at this point that he transformed into a productive writer, publishing one or more books each year for the rest of his life. Since he was a father of young children, he tried out bedtime stories on his children which he later used in his books. The letters, which he felt

"awfully lucky to have something like this to refer to in my old age" (Dahl 1984, 82), remained in his possession as reference points for his two autobiographies. Writing stories and personal narratives allowed him to reach a part of his writing self, finding a wider audience for the stories he used to tell his mother.

This brief review of Dahl's life demonstrates that he had many episodes in his life worth writing about. He encountered intriguing experiences with the many rich and famous individuals in Washington, New York, and Hollywood. Likewise, the many tragedies he and his family endured would have sold books and created sympathy with his readers. Numerous biographies exist about Dahl and Neal's relationship, including *Pat and Roald* (Farrell 1969), Neal's autobiography *As I Am* (Neal and Deneut 1988), and *Patricia Neal: An Unquiet Life* (Shearer 2006). Readership for these books demonstrates that a public audience would have welcomed his side of the story. There were clearly many reasons for Dahl to write about his life with Pat and try to repair his reputation which had been damaged by a contentious and complicated divorce (Shearer 2006, 332). Of all the stories that he could have chosen for an autobiography, Dahl returned to stories which examined his own childhood through early adult years. It is possible that through writing, Dahl was able to connect to his mother, reconstructing and reliving his life. His memories in *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984) and *Going Solo* (1986) returned him to a time when she was alive. This need became the inspiration for writing *Going Solo*, allowing him to bring her back into his to life once again. Through his narrative, he returned to the safety and protection his mother provided, remaining her loyal and loving son.

CHAPTER III

AN OVERVIEW OF *GOING SOLO* AND DAHL'S PERSONAL LETTERS

Dahl's writing can be understood more thoroughly using the methodology and theories found in the discipline of folklore. In particular, *Going Solo* can be viewed as storytelling narrative and a reconstruction of Dahl's past told through stories. The use of literary personal narrative in folklore is a tricky endeavor since one person cannot create his or her own folklore, and folklore itself is hard to define. For a working definition of folklore, I've combined the well-known discourse of three influential folklorists into one comprehensive definition: folklore is a distinctive, dynamic process (Toelken 1979, 10), having to do with "artistic communication in small groups" (Ben-Amos 1971, 13), enabling us to understand ourselves and others better (Abrahams 1968, 157). *Going Solo* is a dynamic re-telling of three pivotal years in the author's life, reconstructed through the use of his own personal letters, flight log, and memories. By examining both the chosen and discarded bits of his life, a pattern of what Dahl truly valued and wanted to communicate to a cadre of readers emerges as part of his living legacy.

Like his mother, Dahl was a storyteller. In his biography, Dahl's niece Bryony confirmed this by saying of Dahl's mother that, "'She was a real storyteller'…. 'I reckon Roald got it from her'" (Sturrock 2010:44). By the time he wrote *Going Solo*, he had a highly developed and well-practiced sense of how to form and tell his stories. Dahl embodied that same sense in his characters, such as the Norwegian grandmother in *The Witches* (1983) and Danny's father in *Danny Champion of the World* (1975). He was inspired by his family in

creating these characters, and clearly considered himself among this list, following a well-established family tradition.

But the problem of calling Dahl a storyteller becomes one of definition. Américo Paredes's classic work on Mexico's corridos shows us of how the definition of "tradition" can shape the outcome of what is or isn't viewed as folklore. Paredes makes a distinction between the corridos as a "traditional ballad," connecting the music to its origins, and as "ballad tradition," reflecting in the dynamic variations created by musicians (Paredes 1963). Returning to Dahl, this thesis will view him as a writer whose skills reflect a storytelling tradition through the conscious choice of subject matter rooted in traditional folklore. Elements in his narrative demonstrate the dynamics of his storytelling abilities, where conventional patterns of folklore are revealed when his stories are arranged, compared, and ordered.

The use of tradition also becomes a question of context. When a writer chooses to create an autobiography, she is creating, at a most basic level, literature written in the first person. This writing reflects a conscious decision to create a permanent record of one's past. With over fifty years of writing experience, Dahl has chosen to make his personal story known through *Going Solo*. This thesis explores the fifty-year gap between the time when Dahl wrote personal letters to his family, and when he created *Going Solo* for a more general audience of readers. In establishing the context for Dahl's storytelling tradition, the question arises of how memory influences tradition, especially Dahl's own storytelling tradition.

As folklorists, we spend quite a bit of effort emphasizing the importance of identifying, capturing, and even preserving tradition. The traditions we see become evident

only because of changes in our culture. Likewise, tradition is the product of memory. If, for example, a traditional method of basket weaving has disappeared, except in the minds of a few artisans, then these remaining practitioners must rely on memory for the re-creation of tradition. The use of memory to preserve the past relates directly to Dahl's creation of *Going Solo*. By using a combination of old letters, vivid memories, and storytelling ability to inspire his writing, Dahl re-creates his past. This dialogue between past and present self is one where Dahl places himself in the unique position of hearing voices from his past self to create himself anew.

If there are two Dahls present, we may want to ask: where is the writer located in the narrative of *Going Solo*? Paul John Eakin writes about the dual nature found in memory, separating narrative and identity of self by saying "we are indeed versions of the extended self and its identity story" (Eakin 2004, 121). Another way to ask the question is: what is the relationship between past and present self, or which "I" should the writer be viewed as? Can Dahl's autobiographical "I" be found in the twenty year old experiencing the war, or in the seventy year old writing about the experiences of his twenty year old self? To explore this further, Eakin summarizes neurologist Antonio Damasio's model of mental reality as an explanation of consciousness (Damasio 1999). Damasio describes a core consciousness, which is reflected in knowledge of self, and an autobiographical consciousness in which the self enables memory to function. In separating levels of consciousness, he refuses to accept a split between perceiver and perceived, (Eakin 2004, 128), or between narrator and narration. Eakin views this as the "teller-effect," where identity and narration are seen as inseparable (Eakin 2004, 128). An all-encompassing view such as this allows us to read and accept the

story Dahl tells us. Any contradictions that exist are the result of Dahl's dual-presence as both storyteller and central character, negating the artificially imposed structure of absolute truthfulness.

Going Solo can best be examined using an approach suggested by Elliot Oring which looks at four contexts of influence including comparative, social, cultural, and individual (Oring 1986) in the narrative. A comparative analysis looks at similarities and differences found in Dahl's use of history, structure, and symbolism. Social context examines characters, settings, time-frames, and motivations for writing. Cultural context views the unseen forces in the writing which influence Dahl's behavior, the use of symbolism, and meaning created by being either a member or an outsider to a group. Finally, individual context involves Dahl's personal qualities, habits, favorite activities, and interests. All four contexts come together to influence the plot of the story Dahl tells us in *Going Solo.*

One complication in analyzing *Going Solo* through Dahl's letters is the ever-present voice of his mother, Sofie Dahl. Even though her letters are not included in the collection, Dahl's mother's voice can be heard clearly and directly in the one-sided dialogue created by reading her son's letters. She emerges as an unseen character, influencing and impacting the life of her son long after her death. Their relationship is deeply rooted in a complicated cross-sexual connection between mother and son. As such, the final great motivation for Dahl's writing is the need to create his story after his mother loses her voice through her death. It is this devastating blow that defines his need to bring his selves together in his narration of *Going Solo.*

Introduction to *Going Solo*

Going Solo was published when Dahl turned seventy, nearly fifty years after the incidents took place and that were described in 126 letters and telegrams written to family. Both book and letters concentrate on elements in life which gave him the most pleasure: fine food and drink, nature, photography, and music. Beyond pleasure, his letters reveal a man who loved his family. *Going Solo* was dedicated to his mother, Sofie Magdalene Dahl, the inspiration for both his interests in writing and storytelling. He says that she "was undoubtedly the absolute primary influence on my life. She had a crystal-clear intellect and a deep interest in almost everything under the sun . . . . [She was] the matriarch, the materfamilias, and her children radiated round her like planets around the sun" (R. Dahl and F. Dahl 1996, 65-6). Jeremy Treglown, Dahl's biographer, devotes a chapter to analyzing the importance of this relationship, which I also have addressed in my opening chapter.

As said earlier, *Going Solo* focuses on three years in which the author leaves his mother behind and goes off in search of his own identity. Dahl combined the letters he wrote in his twenties, and memory he retained into his seventies to form *Going Solo* into his own personal narrative. He commented on his own writing by saying that it is

> . . . my own personal story precisely where my earlier autobiography, which is called *Boy*, left off. I am away to East Africa on my first job, but because any job, even if it is in Africa, is not continuously enthralling, I have tried to be as selective as possible and have written only about those moments I consider memorable. (Dahl 1986, preface)

Dahl emphasizes three points: being away, being in Africa, and being selective with his memory. By providing a preview of what will come, he establishes that being away from home is first and foremost on his mind.

Rather than simply using the letters and his memory to reconstruct everything that has happened in his life, he reveals a storyteller's sensibility to be selective and make deliberate choices. When telling us how to write an autobiography, he says:

> A life is made up of a great number of small incidents and a small number of great ones. An autobiography must therefore, unless it is to become tedious, be extremely selective, discarding all the inconsequential incidents in one's life and concentrating upon those that remained vivid in the memory. (Dahl 1986, preface)

With these lines, Dahl gives himself permission to rewrite his past selectively, eliminating smaller incidents as inconsequential, while elevating his vivid memories to a higher level of importance. By selectively discarding bits of his story, he recreates himself as the man that he wants to be remembered as being.

Dahl divides *Going Solo* into two parts: his pre-enlistment time spent in Africa and his enlistment in Britain's Royal Air Force. The ship voyage to Africa, wild animal encounters, preparations for the war, and descriptions of the natives are highlighted in the first half of the book. Dahl's growing interest in domesticity indicated in his letters which tell of menus, budgets, and home management skills is missing from *Going Solo*. Enlistment in the R.A.F. allows him to honorably walk away from his three year commitment to Shell Oil.

The last half of the book has Dahl finding his wings as he discovers his love of flying and adventure. In an effort to convince us that everything in this section really happened, he writes in his preface that: "there was no need to select or discard because every moment was, to me at any rate, totally enthralling" (Dahl 1986, preface). Beginning with no military experience, he learns to fly, survives a crash, and returns to fly fighter planes with his squadron, all before being discharged. It is important to keep in mind that while the largest portion of the book is devoted to flying fighter planes, Dahl spends only three months in

active duty. Letters from this time period are sparse; therefore Dahl has relied heavily on memory and history to reconstruct his stories.

Dahl's romance with flying is the main emphasis of the second half of the book. He launches into unbelievably clear descriptions of the landscape during flying. For example, he writes: "you may not believe it but I can remember having lifted my plane just a tiny bit to clear a stone wall" (Dahl 1986, 145). Scattered throughout the story, this dialogue functions as what Elliott Oring describes as the "rhetoric of truth," acknowledging the audience's doubts before asserting truthfulness (Oring 2008, 141). Testimonials such as these are included in the text to create dialogue between Dahl and his audience, emphasizing choices made when telling stories.

Example of Dahl's Letter in Context

Dahl could be considered his own best informant. By reading *Going Solo*, we become familiar with stories that Dahl constructed and re-created using his memories and letters. Each of these letters shows the same kind of manipulation as his fiction, but at the same time have a freshness of style which is recaptured with time. Since this thesis will rely mainly on excerpts to identify similarities and differences between book and letters, it would be helpful to view a transcription of one entire letter to illustrate patterns common in all of Dahl's letters. This particular example falls between the time of Dahl's enlistment and the crash, and was written when he was stationed in the desert just outside of Baghdad. It begins:

> Dear Mama,
>
> At last I am able to write to you under fairly normal conditions. I'm sitting in a chair, at a table; and there is no sand in my eyes, ears or mouth. To us, this camp, which a month ago was a pretty bloody uncivilized sort of place, now appears to be the very height of luxury. The beds seem uncommonly soft and sheets dazzlingly

white. You no longer find a little heap of sand in the bottom of your mug after you've drunk your tea - And last night I wore a set of clean clothes.

That we should have come to regard Habbaniya in the light of a luxury city is a very excellent and I am told, quite unprecedented thing - But I'm afraid that it will not be so for long. Soon, no doubt, we shall once more be so spoilt that we shall be crying out for a drink of whiskey, a taxi, or a theater; or a dance and the company of women. But at present we are very thankful for small mercies - and comforts.

I don't know how much I may tell you of what happened, but I don't think that the Censor can object to a bare outline. It is after all common knowledge by now in Baghdad.

The ancient river Euphrates chose this singularity inopportune moment to flood its banks to an extent previously unheard of, due to the melting of the snows up in Turkey where she has her source. (You can no longer argue that we too have not felt the effect of your cold winter). As this camp is on the river it was, said the authorities, assuredly in a very dangerous position in spite of the fact that enormous bands some 20 ft high have been built all around. It was generally assumed that the whole camp would be 20 ft under water. It was very difficult to imagine so vast a place being completely inundated - but was it not the Euphrates that submerged the proud city of Babylon.

What to do? Get out quick. So the whole camp, plus every item of equipment, stoves, food, planes, chair, tables, hospitals dental chairs started a grand trek up onto a huge sand plateau situated on some mountains some 3 miles from the camp. To visualize the magnitude of the operation you've got to realize the size of the camp. I don't know how many people there are here; probably some 4000 British men and about 6000 Iraqis from the civil component, who act as our servants, shopkeepers, labourers etc. Anyway this vast camp was set up. Tents appeared, and we all bundled in. I drove an Albion lorry for three days transporting crates of dried fruit, marmalade and ammunition up there. The temp. was well over 100° in the shade and the dust was everywhere.

The camp itself was many miles in circumference, and you could well walk about in it for an hour without finding the squadron for which you were looking. Beside it were lines of aircraft pegged down in the open on a flat piece of desert, whither they had been hurriedly flown.

Once installed we spent our time working in gangs on the band, reinforcing it with sandbags. I worked every night from 10 pm to 6:30 am! Every day there was a dust storm up on the plateau. The sand all around the camp had been churned to powder by the lorries, so that even the lightest wind would raise it in a cloud. This dust or sand is guaranteed to get anyone down, and in a tent and eating in the open - doubly so. There were times when the cookhouses just couldn't function.

Then came the scorpions. They loved the tents, and many were killed. (scorpions, not people). The secret was never to walk barefoot, always to look in your blankets before going to bed. Nevertheless several people were bitten. One fellow went to bed with a sand viper - asked him if it was for want of a more suitable companion, but he swears he didn't do it on purpose! I killed a 4 ft sand viper on the

> band the other evening just as it was approaching Peter Moulding who was sitting down having a rest and a cigarette.
>
> The next result of our labours was that we beat the river. The night on the band we saw the water creep up to within 2 feet of the top, - lorries were waiting to rush us away if it broke; but it was not to be. Breaches were made in the banks at other points to relieve the pressure and no doubt many wandering Iraqis and Bedouins were drowned, but Habbaniya was saved. And now we're all moving back and trying to wash ourselves clean. I am told that the river has burst its banks lower down and is flowing across the plains to the Tigres and Baghdad is going to be flooded to buggery.
>
> I've just received a letter from you and one from Asta enclosed. I'll bet you the Beste's [sic] are still in Josefine quite safe and sound. I'm sure things aren't so frightfully bad in Oslo. They are only bombing the aerodome. But I don't think you've much hope of hearing from them for a long time. As for old Firese [sic] and all the others—goodness knows. It's pretty bloody.
>
> As far as I can see you're doing too much work; Ellen says so too. You simply must get a maid - and keep her. Why don't you take that holiday?
>
> Tell Asta I've just told her story about the Missippi [not sure] at supper and it lifted the roof off. People sputtered custard all over the place through laughing with their mouths full.
>
> I must stop to catch the post. They tell me there's a parcel for me at the P.O. - may be my shoes - or even the Christmas cake and pullover! I'll let you know next post. Lots of love to all—Roald
>
> [note written on side of letter]: Have received my money - Many Thanks. You forgot to seal up the envelope of the last letter with Asta's inside. (RD/14/4/18, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 8 May 1940, RDMSC).[2]

This full-length narrative encapsulates Dahl's personal repertoire with his mother, containing all the elements found in many of his letters. It begins on an unconventional note as he launches into teasers for the story that will follow. He ignores, or reduces to a mere inconvenience, the desire of the military censors to keep logistical information out of personal correspondence. Then, he starts his story, opening by blaming the Euphrates River for choosing such an inopportune time to flood.

[2] The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre archive recommends this format to include archive reference number, description, date, and abbreviated museum name for reference of individual letters.

Dahl demonstrates his adept ability to mix fact and speculation as he tells the story of the whole camps relocation to higher ground. Facts are presented very authoritatively, as he revels in his growing geographic knowledge by repetitive use of city and river names. In other letters, he even goes so far as to tell his mother to pull out her atlas and follow along. He throws in the use of numbers and lists objects to add even more credibility to his story. All of this is readily apparent in this sample letter and in the many examples used throughout this thesis.

As with other stories, digressions occur often in Dahl's telling as he becomes sidetracked by his love of food and nature. In describing the relocation of his camp, dried fruit and marmalade appear before ammunition, giving them a slightly elevated status in the mind of the reader. Likewise, scorpions and sand vipers merit a whole paragraph, while his human companions are hardly mentioned. He tells of others' bites and stings to remind his mother that danger is always present. But, quickly points out that the scorpions, and not people, were killed, using a joke to reassure her of his safety. He also introduces another topic of jokes, ones which involve sexual innuendo, by mentioning the man who went to bed with the sand viper "for want of a more suitable companion."

Another feature of his stories found in this letter is his interest in creating a panoramic view of his surroundings. By describing the height of the camp and the enormous sandbag bands that surround the camp, he allows the reader to see camp and its location through the eyes of photographer. As with all stories, he ends on an uplifting note by saying that his companions have "moved back and trying to wash themselves clean." He adds that last bit

which has the effect of reminding the reader that he is an adult, fully capable of caring for himself.

Continuing the letter in a more traditional manner, he acknowledges the receipt of mail from both his mother and sister Asta. Then, acting as a dutiful son, he reassures his mother the Bestes (his grandparents in Norway) are safe and probably not too heavily impacted by the war. By telling his mother that she must "get a maid - and keep her," he reverses their roles and hints at her rather dominant personality. Humor is used to lighten the tone as he declares that the joke Asta sent was a hit.

In traditional letter writing style, Dahl closes by reminding his mother that he is running out of time and needs to catch the outgoing mail. But, as always, he hopes for the goodies she sent to arrive and declares his love before closing. A post-script written on the side of the letter acknowledges his monetary dependence, and reminds her that she forgot to seal her last letter. The closing remarks serve to return us to image of Dahl as dependent son writing to his loving family.

Patterns found in this letter are typical of nearly all of Dahl's letters. By seeing each line in context, we can understand his intent when looking at smaller motifs extracted throughout the rest of the paper. Larger folkloric themes, such as humor, legend, landscape, and characters studies found in *Going Solo* can be better understood through comparison and analysis to these sorts of example from Dahl's letters.

CHAPTER IV

RITE OF PASSAGE: A COMMENTARY ON DAHL'S LEAVING HOME

Going Solo begins with Dahl's ritualistic rite of passage. In order to define this event, I have organized my discussion around the three segments suggested by Arnold Van Gennep in his *Rites of Passage*: separation, liminality, and reincorporation (Van Gennep 1960). Separation is demonstrated by Dahl's leaving home for his first extended amount of time and removing himself from direct contact with loved ones. When Dahl boards the ship for passage to Africa, he falls into a liminal state between youth and adulthood. Finally, after surviving the war and a near-fatal airplane crash, Dahl returns home to his mother, is viewed as a war hero, and is transformed into an adult.

Scholars, including Simon Bronner and others, have described the ceremony at sea of "crossing the line," or the equator, as an important transition, especially in association with sailors (Bronner 2006, 8; Richardson 1977). Dahl includes a photo in *Going Solo* labeled "Crossing The Equator. Me being dunked." An arrow points to Dahl as the man being forced into a ship-board water tank while uniformed men watch (Dahl 1986, 21) the ceremony. While the photo lacks an accompanying story, it does tell us that he was aware of the tradition. Dahl's military service was not part of his sea crossing, but stories of the two may have blurred in his mind by the time he wrote *Going Solo*.

Boarding the ship allows Dahl to leave the comforts of home behind. He received a ceremonial sendoff from friends and loved ones, on the pier of the London Docks as he boarded S.S. Mantola (Sturruck 2010, 104). The next two weeks are spent at sea, in the

company of British empire-builders, who have their own look, language, and eccentricities (Dahl 1986, 2-3). His letters from the ship express his concern for the dogs and the one horse on the ship, but fail to mention the passengers (RD/14/3/1, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Sep 1938, RDMSC). A passenger writes in a letter to Mrs. Dahl that: "This is the promised letter with news of Raold [sic]." She also says that he is looking better and is popular with everyone, adding that he is especially good with the children (RD/14/3/4, Letter from Irma (family friend) to Mrs. Dahl, 4 Oct 1938, RDMSC). As one of few letters in the collection written by a non-family member, his mother must have kept it as a reminder that she had a good son.

Separation weighs heavily on Dahl's mind as he embarks on his adventure. In *Going Solo*, he reflects that he was twenty-two at the outset, and would be twenty-four years old before he would return (Dahl 1986, 1). His letters demonstrate the same reluctance to be away, bargaining that "if I stay here [in Africa] which I probably won't for the whole time - I shall only do 3 years instead of 4" (RD/14/3/7, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 16 Oct 1938, RDMSC). Reluctance reflected in both *Going Solo* and letters show us that his choice to be away was neither preferable nor easy for him to live with. The choice of separation, while full of excitement and trepidation, was however, a necessary component for him to gain his maturity.

Falling betwixt and between, the ship voyage itself represents liminal domain. As Dahl sails toward to his future maturity, he leaves his childhood behind, and is in the meantime neither a boy nor a man. He continues to write weekly, usually on Sundays, in a pattern established during his boarding school days. His letters serve as a sounding board for

his new status as he writes, hoping to demonstrate a new level of maturity as an adult. When he asks for things such as clothing or a pipe in his letters from Africa, he now provides specifics on where to buy the item, how much to expect to pay, and how to ship it to him.

Part of this new maturity is also reflected in his interest in establishing a domestic life and routine for himself in the wilds of Africa. For instance, within three months of his arrival, he moves from a room in the club to "Shell House Oyster Bay," a whole home outside of town which he shares with a friend. In his first letter after moving, he introduces mother to *his* staff and pets, who run the house and keep it interesting (RD/14/3/19, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Jan 1939, RDMSC). Within a month, he writes: "I'm doing damn well as housekeeper of this Mansion," declaring his success at household management. He also presents lists of menus that include curried crabs, sheep brains in spinach, and fresh fish for his mother's approval (RD/14/3/22, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 5 Feb 1939, RDMSC). Menus, recipes, and budgets are deliberately mentioned, which remind his mother that he is an adult, and therefore her equal.

While Dahl's words say one thing, his actions continue to demonstrate another. The letters are a show-and-tell of objects he has found in Africa, binding mother and son. Like going into a child's pocket at laundry time, one can only imagine Sofie's trepidation at opening letters full of surprises ranging from pressed moths (RD 14/3/33, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 15/16 Apr 1939, RDMSC; RD 14/3/39, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 28 May 1939, RDMSC), and seeds (RD 14/3/42, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 16 Jun 1939, RDMSC), to hair cuttings of his pets (RD/14/3/22 Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 5 Feb 1939, RDMSC). *Going Solo* uses a similar shock and awe style, where stories of all manner of exotic beast replace

the physical objects. Both book and letters go at great lengths to add distance to the relationship between mother and son. Great distance seems however to have little or no impact on their relationship. Dahl continues, with apron strings intact, to assert his childlike nature in letters he writes from Africa.

The title *Going Solo* could be seen as a reflection of Dahl's journey to adulthood. He uses the phrase in the book to express his joy at flying alone for the first time. On his first solo flight, he says that he was "lucky enough to be allowed to go whizzing and soaring through the sky above a country as beautiful as Kenya" (Dahl 1986, 87). Clearly the origin of this description comes from a letter in which he also writes about learning to fly for the first time, saying that he was "lucky enough to be allowed to go whizzing and soaring through the sky above a country as beautiful as Kenya" (Dahl 1986, 87). The title might also remind the reader of Dahl's first solo flight from his mother, who are reminded as he writes this autobiography after her death, that he is once again alone.

Returning to Dahl's rite of passage, both separation and liminality are followed by a reincorporation. As his journey takes him away from his family, allowing him to establish a household for the first time, his enlistment in the military offers him a chance to achieve adulthood through survival. He says of this experience that: "Each man was wrapped up in a cocoon of his own problems, and the sheer effort of trying to stay alive and at the same time doing your duty was concentrating the minds of everyone around me" (Dahl 1986, 133). This passage describes the solo nature of Dahl's passage to adulthood. In saying this, he shows an uncharacteristically thoughtful side, one seldom explored in *Going Solo*. As a survivor, Dahl leaves the war alive, far better off than most of his companions. This allows him to be

considered a war hero. After his crash, he fulfills his duty until his injuries get the better of him, achieving for himself an honorable release from active duty. His reincorporation is described in great detail at the end of *Going Solo* as he returns home to the loving arms of his patiently waiting mother.

CHAPTER V

CHARACTER STUDIES AND HUMOR

With the sensibility of a storyteller, Dahl uses characters in both *Going Solo* and his letters to introduce important themes and ideas. Additionally, characters are used to bring humor to *Going Solo,* as they are much more refined and socially acceptable than the jokes he tells in his letters. In *Going Solo*, characters on the ship share a characteristic of "otherness" which he associates with people who have lived outside of England for too long. They are, as he puts it, representative of British Empire-builders, who "live for years in a foul and sweaty climate among foreign people" and "maintain their sanity by allowing themselves to go slightly dotty" (Dahl 1986, 3). Rather than simply telling us why the empire-builders are odd, Dahl creates characters in *Going Solo* who, like classic folktale characters, show us what he feels British colonialism looks like abroad.

In the first chapter of *Going Solo*, called "The Voyage Out," all action revolves around Dahl's introduction to four characters. Each is stranger than the last. Major Griffiths and his wife, Mrs. Major Griffiths are nudist exercise enthusiasts. While peeking out a spy-hole, Dahl sees them galloping naked at high speeds, and admires the couple as "innocent and unembarrassed and cheerful and friendly." Likewise, the couple enjoys being seen, and they invite Dahl to join them at a meal. Mutual admiration soon ends when they learn that Dahl lacks proper knowledge of polo (Dahl 1986, 5). It becomes apparent that some topics, such as polo, remain sacred in the minds of the proper Empire-builder.

This stark example of Major and Mrs. Major is followed by Miss Trefusis, who shares Dahl's love of reading, and of the author Isak Dinesen. She appears to be the perfect

ship-mate for Dahl until her eccentricities make themselves known. He observes her table manners as she oddly dissects and eats an orange carefully with a knife and fork. When questioned, he learns that she has a compulsive aversion to dirt, emphatically stating that "'Fingers are foul and filthy, but toes! Toes are reptilian and viperfish! I don't wish to talk about them'" (Dahl 1986, 10). This introduces Dahl to the idiosyncrasies adopted by some Empire-builders in an effort to control what they can of their environment while living in what he considers the "wilds" of Africa.

Reserving the best for last, Dahl introduces us to his own cabin companion U.N. Savory, whose very name blatantly expresses his feelings towards the man. While he is frequently overheard discussing hair care, Dahl soon learns that he is bald. To hide his baldness, he has developed an elaborate ruse relying on four wigs and Epsom salts to make it seem as if his growing hair has a dandruff problem (Dahl 1986, 18). Dahl again demonstrates a character whose odd behavior could have come only from what he views as living away from Britain in an uninhabitable climate.

Dahl mentions none of these colorful characters in his letters and instead describes the other passengers of the SS Mantola as "pretty dull" (RD/14/3/1, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Sept 38, RDMSC). Most of his narrative focuses on the extreme heat and improvements to his ship-board tennis skills (RD/14/3/5, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 6 Oct 38, RDMSC). In a nod to U.N. Savory, toupees are a topic found in a few of Dahl's letters. He makes mention of a toupee he has purchased while still traveling to Africa (RD/14/3/5, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 6 Oct 38, RDMSC). Photos later in life show Dahl with an obvious comb-over, a hairstyle worn by balding men. This coupled with the fact that he

purchased a toupee so early in his life, certainly hints at some degree of hair loss. He did have all of his teeth pulled before leaving for Tanzania (Sturrock 2010, 191), and was a strong proponent for having other relatives do the same. The first royalties for writing *The Gremlins* were spent on an expensive "set of clackers" (Sturrock 2010, 191). Later, he suggests that his pet, Dog Samka, is becoming a bit bald and will be given a toupee (RD/14/3/22, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 5 Feb 39, RDMSC). Finally, he tells the story of his friend George, who loses his toupee while boarding a ship, and has it rescued by a native (RD/14/3/34, Roald Dahl letter to Else and Asta, 23 Apr 39, RDMSC). It is clear that Dahl finds toupees humorous, and could be that toupee stories are used to hide his other physical flaws, which demonstrate premature aging, including hair loss.

If Dahl had met anyone as interesting as his funny foursome from *Going Solo*, why wouldn't they have been made it into his letters? It is helpful to remember that Dahl's time aboard ship board time was fairly short, only about two weeks. He may have used Mrs. Trefusis to answer this question when she tells us that dottiness isn't as noticeable when you're young (Dahl 1986, 8). After he settles into his own place in Africa, Dahl does write home about a few odd guests he hosts at dinner parties:

> We had the Colonel - an old boy of 76 who has [been] hunting orchids in the forest of South America, mine-prospecting in the forests of Malay, buggering about in Hong Kong & fucking about all over the world. We like him – and he's called 'Iron discipline,' always to be pronounced together with a hearty thump on the table with your fist. That's because he keeps thumping his old wizened fist on the table – rattling the glasses and upsetting the wiskey [sic] - exclaiming the while 'Now discipline, that's what we want, Iron discipline.' He tells some incredible stories about his escapades—they make Lord Dunsany pale into insignificance.
>
> Then we had Allan & Maisie Knox - Allan drinks like a fish and Maisie smokes like a chimney but they are very decent. And there was Jack & Penny Burgess - Jack's an old sea captain who's now manager of the African Wharfage which is quite a big job,

> and he can tell you a thing or two about sailing in schooners to Australia (RD/14/3/23, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 12 Feb 1939, RDMSC).

If the Colonel and Captain Burgess are real characters Dahl encountered, then their stories, habits, and eccentricities could easily have inspired the characters in *Going Solo.* I suggest that memory and time have transformed the stories in *Going Solo*, blending characters together, and creating new ones out of what he remembered.

Most humorous characters in Dahl's letters come from the stories he creates centered around his pets. To begin with, a life without pets would be unimaginable for any member of the Dahl family (Sturrock 2010, 107). Once settled in at Shell House, his letters attest to this fact and are devoted to the exploits of his pets: Oscar, Mrs. Taubsypuss, and Dog Samka. Oscar, a white Persian cat, is notable for having had his "pocket picked," which means he was neutered. In the opposite direction, Mrs. Taubsypuss, a beautiful, blue Persian cat, is admired for her active sex life. She becomes the president's pet cat in Dahl's *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1972). Finally, Dog Samka, or Sam, is a tick-infested black dog "with the biggest tool and the longest tail" (RD/14/3/19, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Jan 1939, RDMSC). Most if not all stories about these pets center on sexual activities and resulting offspring. While he enjoyed talking about sex, his sister Alfhild said of her brother that he "didn't really discuss himself" (Sturrock 2010, 103). Very few women are mentioned in his letters. Perhaps Dahl's own lack of sexual activity, coupled with an apparent Oedipus complex, has him turn to the pet's exploits for a connection to his mother and for vicarious satisfaction.

Dogs are especially favored by the Dahl family. During a pre-Africa visit to Norway, he writes to his mother that his grandmother "is very angry that you didn't come and says

you care more for your puppies" (RD/14/2/1, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 1935, RDMSC) than your parents. Dogs are clearly the pet most favored by the Dahl family, as in later years Dahl even devotes pages in his recipe book to them (R. Dahl and F. Dahl 1996, 229-31). Described by biographers as a loner, Dahl is known also as a "fantastic chronicler of Dog Samka's amorous adventures" (Sturrock 2010, 119). The dog seems to reflect many of Dahl's own fantasies and flaws. We are told in letters that Dog Samka has a lady friend (RD/14/3/26, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Mar 1939, RDMSC), suffers from constipation (RD/14/3/27, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Mar 1939, RDMSC), and prances about the house in a bathing suit like the "Empress of Australia" (RD/14/3/37, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 14 May 1939, RDMSC). He even shares tea time with his master, dining on toast and Marmite (RD/14/3/39, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 28 May 1939, RDMSC). Dog Samka is central to Dahl's life but does not appear in *Going Solo*. The only domesticated animal mentioned in *Going Solo* is a pet dog that is eulogized with one line "Pity about the dog" after being killed by a snake (Dahl 1986, 50). Perhaps leaving dogs out of the *Going Solo* demonstrates an unwillingness to reveal the intimate details of his personality to his audience of readers.

While sitting at home recovering from a leg injury, Dahl wrote his mother the story of one of Dog Samka's most dramatic exploits. He tells how Dog Samka is lost and accidentally locked in a local chemist's shop for nearly a day, and has to subsist on beauty creams and perfume. When the dog is finally found and released, he "trotted out his lips were rouged and he'd powdered his balls" (RD/14/3/39, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 28 May 1939, RDMSC). This humorous tale with an intentional punch line does not even appear in *Going Solo.* In letters, many of Dahl's stories are the product of observations made alone, or on the mend

from injuries or illness. Dog Samka can certainly be seen as an alter-ego for the sexual-oriented Dahl, who is starved for a creative outlet. These letters demonstrate some entertaining, albeit inappropriate, stories he shares with his mother. They also offer a good lead-in to a discussion of jokes and pranks in Dahl's letters.

Going Solo shows us Dahl's ability to express humor through characters and dialogue, while his letters are full of jokes that are much more direct. Dahl uses humor and jokes to say everything he can't say in real life. His jokes are rude, direct, offensive, and socially unacceptable, especially in his role as a gentleman, and later an officer. Most jokes are said to be directed at his sisters, but it is assumed that they were written for his mother as well, since she was the one who kept them. An early example of Dahl's joke-telling occurs after his mother's recent oral surgery. He uses her condition as a lead into a doctor/patient joke, which starts with:

> . . . a person who had all (sic) teeth out & couldn't be fed through the mouth. So the Doctor said – I'll have to feed you with a tube through your anus – what would you like for your first meal? - A cup of tea please doctor – Right, here goes –Hi, stop doctor, stop – What's the matter, what's the matter, is it too hot? No, too much sugar in it. (RD14/03/13, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Oct 1939, RDMSC)

This culturally-oriented British joke stresses not only the importance of tea, but the value of taste over tea-drinking experience. While much less risqué than many jokes he tells, it still relies on juvenile, body-part humor. Another inappropriate doctor/patient joke he tells his family is of a girl who goes to the doctor because she is worried about "making water" in four streams. The doctor finds a fly button from a man's pants up her "cunny" (RD14/03/21, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Jan 1940, RDMSC). The sexual innuendo in this joke lingers long after it is told. By telling these sorts of jokes to his mother and sisters, he shows us that,

at least for the Dahl family, taboo subjects are acceptable when presented as entertainment. The Oedipal complex between mother and son that this subject introduces is certainly a subject for further research.

In the course of events leading up to World War II, fear of Hitler and the Axis forces were on everyone's mind. And, like everyone else, Dahl had his own series of Hitler jokes and tells the following before his enlistment:

> [I]f he must keep his mind on guns, why doesn't he concentrate on a little vigorous fornication.…Wasn't it Hitler who said to Goering 'I am ready for a whore…I want a whore in the air, but don't give me a Civil Whore, they bore me, whereas it should be the other way around. (RD14/03/32, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Apr 1940, RDMSC)

The phrase "Hitler's whore" crops up often in future letter as it is adopted by Dahl as code for the war. Jokes in this cycle express the fear that many people, including Dahl and his family, had regarding the war. Telling jokes in this manner allowed people to regain control of their lives by making Hitler look pathetic and powerless.

One curious letter from Africa was written in a style reminiscent of Dahl's boarding school correspondence. It appears on stationary from Repton, Dahl's former boarding school, and begins by describing a goal he scored in a school sporting. Following the story, he admits to using old stationary because he was short on paper (RD14/03/24, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Feb 1940, RDMSC). This simple childhood prank presents another example of Dahl as a complicated character. Far less bawdy than his usual jokes, it shows us his softer, more playful side, one that allows us to imagine him giggling all the way to the mailbox about the effect on his mother when she opened and read the letter.

One final example, written in uncharacteristically sloppy penmanship, was told at the end of a letter after a night of drinking. In a space reserved for the post script, he tells the

following joke as an afterthought which begins with: “Anyone know why the Seven Dwarfs always wash with Persil at night? So as to get up Snow White in the morning. You should have stopped me if you’d heard it before” (RD14/03/31, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 2 Apr 1939, RDMSC). The joke combines Snow White, a popular cultural icon at the time, with Persil, a British laundry detergent known for making things white. It demonstrates a connection to contemporary culture at the time and sounds like a joke that any child might bring home from school. The dialogue style begs for a response, hoping that his joke-telling has found willing listeners in his family. The softer tone from this joke and the previous prank is overshadowed by an abundance of letters containing sexual innuendo or bathroom humor. Many of the jokes demonstrate the open relationship Dahl shared with his mother and sisters.

How humor works is a mystery to most of us. We read or hear a joke and laugh, sometimes against our will or better judgment, but rarely explore the deeper need that we have to tell jokes. Folklorists have written about many types of joke cycles such as ethnic jokes (Dundes 1971), dead baby jokes (Dundes 1979), and “dumb blond” jokes (Thomas 1997), to name a few, which serve the purpose of voicing societies’ anxieties. Dahl’s jokes are shaped and formed in the same manner as other common joke cycles. His focus seems to center on either the war or topics of a taboo or sexual nature. Each of these areas expresses anxieties Dahl has about his own coming of age in this period of uncertainly before the war. By using his letters to talk about such topics, he is trying to make light of the heaviness that is in his life, and ease not only his own mind, but also the minds of the people who love him that are far away.

CHAPTER VI

AFRICAN ADVENTURES AND WILD ANIMALS

Dahl is first and foremost a storyteller. From the day his fiction started selling, he demonstrated his ability to carefully craft and re-work stories which are memorable long after they are read for elements of horror and suspense. Many of his well-known children's stories owe their popularity to his ability to select and write about topics which appeal to his readers. The stories found in *Going Solo* are meant to be read, remembered, and talked about by an audience of fans who adore Dahl. With this in mind, he selected memorable moments for the book, filling his descriptions of his African experiences with adventures featuring wild animals.

Like the storytellers behind the movie character Indiana Jones, Dahl knows that stories about snakes will bring out base fears in himself and his audience. Early in *Going Solo* he claims that a deadly black mamba snake "could travel as fast as a galloping horse." Acting as a fearless hero, he kills a black mamba by striking it with a golf club, and saves his gardener, Salimu (Dahl 1986, 27-9). His letters tell a different story. In one story, he fears an injured snake's retribution so much that he hides in a car with all the windows and doors closed tightly (RD14/03/52, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 22 Aug 1940, RDMSC). Another tale has Dahl perched on the roof of his car after a black mamba is sited. Given a hockey stick, he becomes part of a gang that chases the poor snake into the garden. With a "lucky shot," he kills the snake and proceeds to reward himself by getting very drunk at the club (RD14/03/58, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 14 Oct 1939, RDMSC). This story, while lacking heroism, is probably the inspiration the tale of the snake encounter in *Going Solo*.

Differences between the two stories make *Going Solo's* version seem rehearsed, having probably been told many times to people before it showed up in the book.

Dahl's stories in *Going Solo* soon leave snakes behind, moving on to wilder and more exotic beasts. One striking example of an exotic beast story is the one he tells of an encounter with a lion. While visiting another Shell employee and his family, Dahl hears his servant Mdisho shout in Swahili "Simba, bwana! Simba! Simba! . . . A huge lion is eating the wife of the cook." After a bit of a chase, the lion drops the wife, who is unharmed, and retreats into the woods. Cooks wife explains that she is unharmed because the lion was toothless. In a noble gesture, the host refuses to kill the lion out of respect, saying "he doesn't deserve it" (Dahl 1986, 35-4). The story is parable-like tale, complete with moralistic message of live and let live. To give it credibility, Dahl said he was paid to write his version down for the *East African Standard*. He calls it his first published work (Dahl 1986, 40). While Dahl's talks of travels for work, neither the lion story nor its publication is mentioned in any of his letters home. If true, this oversight is highly unusual from the man who writes about the exploits of lizards on his walls. And especially given that money issues appear in nearly in every letter – even complaints for overcharged for postage (RD14/3/32, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Apr 1939, RDMSC) are commonplace, and are mentioned repeatedly.

Most of Dahl's wild animal encounters in letters are of a more scatological nature. First of all, even though he purchased a car to drive to and from work, he says that distant travel is hindered by his coastal location, poor quality roads, and heavy rains (RD14/3/16, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Dec 1938, RDMSC). While on a road trip with his friend George, he talks not of animals but of scat, saying that they "passed a large consignment of Rhino

shit, still steaming, but lucky for us the Rhinos had gone their way." Likewise, elephant droppings are described as "simply enormous." His mention of contact with animals is limited to a baby monkey he tells of catching (RD14/03/52, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 22 Aug 1939, RDMSC). Contrary to appearing adventurous, Dahl seems relieved to have avoided contact with large animals.

Towards the end of his stay in Dar es Salaam, a trip between Kenya and Tanzania allows Dahl to see a few more wild animals. Among those seen from his train window are antelope, zebra, ostrich, buffalo, and giraffe (RD14/03/62, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 14 Nov 1939, RDMSC). Returning by car, he sees giraffes, rhinoceroses, and zebras. But he finds the people far more interesting than the wildlife, describing them as having "mud and paint on their face and hair and bows and arrows and speers (sic)." They impress him with their height and their ability to hunt lions with bows (RD14/03/64, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Nov 1939, RDMSC). From these letters, one would conclude Dahl's experience with wild animals was limited, and from a safe distance inside a car or train.

"An African Story:" Retelling of a Legend

Dahl's short story, "An African Story," reminiscent of stories told in *Going Solo*, demonstrates his fascination and fear of snakes. The story, set in Kenya in 1939, resembles other legends (to be discussed later) which tell of snakes stealing milk from cows. The short story is written as a framed tale where the narrator finds a manuscript in the pocket of a dead pilot. The manuscript tells of a farmer, who discovers that his missing milk is being taken by a black mamba snake. After his servant senselessly murders the farmer's dog, he sends the servant out to protect the cow from thieves. The servant is killed by the snake. The farmer

then decides to reward the snake for this good deed by saying "we don't mind you're having his share" (Dahl 2006, 16). Just like the story of the toothless lion in *Going Solo*, this parable-like tale ends by sparing the animal's life.

A potential publisher rejected the original story, entitled "An Eye for a Tooth" after Ann Watkins, Dahl's literary agent, asked an expert at New York's Museum of Natural History comment on it. The expert, Dr. Bogert, declared it improbable because snakes do not possibly possess sufficient powers of suction to take milk from a cow (RD1/1/1/70, Ann Watkins (Dahl's agent) letter to Roald Dahl, 8 Dec 1943, RDMSC). Dahl, seeing himself as an expert on Africa, maintained that he had gathered from natives who would attest to its truthfulness (Sturruck 2010, 113). The story was later published as "An African Story."

When "An African Story" is viewed as a legend, it becomes part of an old and rich tradition including Giovanni Francesco Poggio Bracchiolini's famous book, *Liber Facetiarum*. Translation of his legend tells of a cow giving birth to an enormous serpent that proceeds to wrap its tail around the cow's hind legs, put its mouth on to one of her teats, and suck out all of the cow's milk (ca. 1450 C.E., Hurwood 1968). During Dahl's lifetime, a rash of similar stories appeared in newspapers throughout the United States. In 1936, *The Ludington Daily News* in Michigan gave an account of a farmer whose hired hand caught a snake stealing milk from a cow. Just as in Bracchiolini's tale, the man watched the snake coil itself around the cow's leg and fasten its mouth to a teat. Then he clubbed and shot the snake, presenting it to the neighbors as proof of his story's truthfulness.

Each of these legends and Dahl's stories have so many similar elements that it is easy to make connections between them. Furthermore, the *Milk Snake*, a species of king snake

which resembles a deadly coral snake, receives its name because of the belief that the snake enters barns to steal milk from cows. It is said that farmers have been known to set bowls of milk in their dairy barns to dissuade thirsty snakes from drinking directly from cows. “An African Story,” written only seven years after the newspaper story, so closely resembles the news account that it serves as an example of how legends may have influenced Dahl’s writing.

Telling Tales of Animals and Natives

Many digressions in *Going Solo,* involving bullfrogs, elephants, and even scorpions, are used to explore Dahl’s own feelings towards the natural world verses the unnatural state of current affairs. In a dialogue that would seem commonplace in any *Monty Python* comedy skit, Dahl explores the mating rituals of the African frog, specifically the eastern bullfrog. He says that the male frog, when feeling sexy, sings a song so lovely that it makes him ignore his mate and forget its purpose until nudged by the female frog (Dahl 1986, 61/2). Another story has Dahl watch an elephant cow and her baby moving with “great peace and serenity,” unaware of the humans hunting them. Admiring their “life of absolute contentment,” he talks of either killing or being killed by Germans (Dahl 1986, 80/1). On a road trip between the Suez Canal and Haifa, he admires a giant black scorpion, six inches long, with fourteen babies on her back, defending her young (Dahl 1986, 190). Each of these stories is chosen reflects on the innocence of nature at a time when Dahl’s world was becoming increasingly hostile.

Creatures such as bullfrogs and scorpions appear often in letters, but play a much less philosophical role. He describes the bullfrogs outside his house as making a noise “rather like

a jazz band beneath you" (RD14/3/16, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Dec 1938, RDMSC). Elephants are admired mainly for the tremendous size of their excrement (RD14/03/52, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 22 Aug 1939, RDMSC). He writes that a "bloody scorpion chased me around my room yesterday" (RD14/3/60, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 28 Oct 1939, RDMSC) which appears to be more of an annoyance than anything. Scorpions continue to be a part of his desert experiences, often showing up in tents and at the latrine, stinging people's feet and bums (RD14/4/16, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 26 Apr 1940, RDMSC). While the letters contain frequent mention of all sorts of animal and insect, Dahl saves the introspection and romantic narratives for his retelling of stories in *Going Solo*. Reflection appears to be the product of age.

Dahl's African adventures would not be complete without examining the relationship between Dahl and his servant Mdisho. In letters, Mdisho is introduced as a "marvelous boy" who fills the role of personal servant and brings juice and food to Dahl (RD14/3/14, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Dec 1938, RDMSC). Because he wanted to learn Swahili, he probably used his newly acquired language skills to communicate with Mdisho. One example has Dahl keeping Mdisho's wages in order to help him save and buy "a first class wife" (RD14/3/14, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Nov 1938, RDMSC). This episode represents the only story of personal interaction and dialogue between Dahl and Mdisho mentioned in his letters home.

In *Going Solo* however, Mdisho borrows Dahl's sword to kill a rich German plantation owner, an act carried out to honor his master's war with the Germans (Dahl 1986, 68-70). Commenting on this action, Dahl romanticizes the role of the natives, telling us that it was the "wild Mwandumwezi tribesman who had been moulded by us Europeans into the

shape of a domestic servant, and now he broke the mould" (Dahl 1986, 73). Memory has failed Dahl, as the name Mwandumwezi probably was meant to refer to the Nyamwezi[3] tribe (Sturrock 2010, 109). This final incident of bonding between Dahl and Mdisho was probably written into the story as an attempt to repair his reputation as a racist. Critics of Dahl's writing charged that the Oompa-Loompas in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl 1964) demonstrated implicit racism because the characters, originally black-skinned and from Africa, were overly childish and were too dependent on Willy Wonka, the white factory owner (West 1992, 66-73). The effect of including the relationship and respect displayed between Dahl and Mdisho in *Going Solo* could be interpreted as his attempt to fix his image. But it instead shows that Dahl still sees the African natives as naïve and mistreated. It provides one more example of Dahl's use of selective memory to tell his African story before moving on to his enlistment and war experiences.

[3] The Nyamwezi are the second largest Swahili-speaking ethnic group in Tanzania.

CHAPTER VII

ROYAL AIR FORCE ENLISTMENT:

TRAINING, THE CRASH, AND ACTIVE DUTY

The second part of *Going Solo* was as Dahl said "totally enthralling," and as such, he said that he didn't need to select or discard any of his experiences (Dahl 1986, preface). Starting with a year of training for the Royal Air Force, these chapters introduce us to Dahl's journey into the unknown. This section of the book covers his crash, recovery, and return to active duty. Most of the events in *Going Solo* take place in the three months of active duty prior to Dahl's medical discharge. The transient nature of the war did not support Dahl's routine of letter writing, and as such, little corroborative evidence of his actual experiences during the war exist. This fact makes the stories hard to confirm, and leads to the examination of Dahl's mention of people, places, and events to help the reader gain a clear picture of influences on his narrative.

After leaving an established domestic life in Africa behind, Dahl writes home with a hope about his new life in the military. This change finds him living in barracks and tents with the other enlisted men. He tells his mother that "It's going to be very good fun. No more nonsense with boys doing everything for you; you wash your own knives & forks & mugs which you own, call everyone sir, and in short lead a life which I think will make one extremely fit and thoroughly good for the soul" (RD14/3/64, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Nov 1939, RDMSC). He seems to be trying to convince both his mother and himself that this new living arrangement, similar to his boarding school experience, will be a good one, and will move him closer to the adulthood he desires.

In the later years of his life, Dahl seemed preoccupied with height. By his mid-teens, he had reached his full height of six foot five (Sturrock 2010, 80). In a letter to future wife, Felicity, he says "I am a huge fellow physically, and I believe that huge fellows, I mean really huge ones of six foot five or six inches, grow physically tired earlier than others" (Sturrock 2010, 465). Nowhere is this preoccupation more evident than in *Going Solo*, where he talks of problems caused by his "six foot six" inch height. The first incident is a dialogue which occurs during his first flight:

> There was a medical exam by an affable English doctor who remarked that six feet six inches was not the ideal height for a flyer of aeroplanes.
> 'Does this mean you can't pass me for flying duties?' I asked him fearfully.
> 'Funnily enough' he said, 'there is no mention of height limit in my instructions, so I can pass you with a clear conscience. Good luck, my boy' (Dahl 1986, 82).

A few pages later, a similar conversation unfolds with his first flight instructor:

> 'You are too tall,' the instructor Flying Officer Parkinson said. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'
>
> 'Yes please,' I said.
>
> 'Wait till we rev her up for take-off,' Parkinson said. 'You'll have a job to breathe. And keep those goggles down or you'll be blinded by watering eyes' (Dahl 1986, 85).

He goes on to say that his height would cause him problems for the rest of his flying career. However, his letters lack any mention of concerns with height, perhaps because most of his family was tall, including his sister Asta, who was six-foot-tall (Sturrock 2010, 269). His only recollection in letters of his first day flying was that he had "[g]reat fun today – did my first flying with [an] extremely pleasant instructor" (RD14/3/64, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, Nov 1939, RDMSC).

Height issues demonstrate a dichotomy between young and old Dahl. It seems that as he grew in fame, he became comfortable with his stature, and realized that being tall was a unique and essential part of his identity. It made him who he was, and defined him as a "big friendly giant" to his fans. Another reason for his preoccupation with his height was that it allowed his older self to explore the idea that, if he listened to certain warning signs, he could have avoided the crash which caused him in lifelong physical pain. By the time Dahl turned seventy and wrote *Going Solo*, his height mattered to him.

The Crash: A Re-telling

Folklorist Bruce Jackson tells us that "stories are about truth, not facts." He adds that our constructions of stories in the present are far more important than what actually happened in the past (Jackson 2007, 36). Dahl's airplane crash is a good illustration of this idea. The crash might have been the biggest event in his life. It certainly impacted the quality of his life with long-lasting consequences. Dahl says that he wrote *Going Solo* to clarify what actually happened for his readers (Dahl 1986, 97). But it should also be noted that his clarifications were complicated because time had passed, and his injuries may have altered the stories that Dahl needed to tell.

After nearly nine months of flight and military training, Dahl became a commissioned officer. Both *Going Solo* and his letters tell us that he ranked second out of a class of forty with a "special distinction," and received an "exceptional" on the course (Dahl 1986, 85). He also tells his mother that he expects to be trained in another type of modern fighter plane soon and will be fighting Italians before the letter arrives (RD14/4/32, Roald Dahl letter to

Mama, 28 Aug 1940, RDMSC). Only 22 days later, on 19 September 1940, he crashes while flying one of the new modern fighter planes.

Many of Dahl's earliest short stories, such as his first published short story "Shot Down Over Libya," include accounts of the crash. The same episode is re-played in "Only This," "A Piece of Cake," and "Lucky Break." By the time *Going Solo* was written, the story had become a well-rehearsed part of his life. In his introduction to the crash, he seems to place the fault of misremembering on his publishers. Bold emphasis has been added to his text to show how he does this:

> There seems, on re-reading it, to be **an implication** that I was shot down by enemy action, and if I remember rightly, **this was inserted by the editors** of an American magazine called the *Saturday Evening Post* who originally bought and published it. Those were the war years and the more dramatic the story, the better it was. **They** actually called it 'Shot Down in Libya', so you can see what **they** were getting at. The fact is that my crash had nothing whatsoever to do with enemy action. I was not shot down either by another plane or from the ground. (Dahl 1986, 97)

By speaking to his audience in this manner, he places the blame for previous stories on other people. It also implies that the version of the story he is about to tell is will be true.

In *Going Solo*, Dahl distances himself from events leading up to the crash. He sets the scene for the flight by explaining that he was flying his first mission in unfamiliar planes when the crash happened. Then, flying at dusk with low fuel, he chose to try to land his plane in the desert because he couldn't make it back to his last re-fueling spot. An attempt at a desert landing soon turns into a crash as Dahl, flying at seventy-five miles an hour, buries the nose of his plane in the sand. Though badly injured, he remains conscious just long enough to pull himself away from the plane before it explodes (Dahl 1986, 97-101). Deflecting blame for the crash, he tells us that a military inquiry found another officer at fault for providing

poor directions (Dahl 1986, 103). His injuries from the crash include a badly fractured skull, a dislocated nose, and missing teeth. After nearly six months of hospitalization and recuperation, he is able to return to flying.

It is interesting that Dahl chose to include most of the first letter he wrote after the crash in *Going Solo*. By inserting the long letter into his book, he seeks to show his audience pieces of his younger self. This action has the effect of showing how clever he was and still is. It ties the two voices that appear in his writing together into one person. In the letter, he tells his family "I was a bit of a mess," and then praises the quality of the doctors for fixing him up. He also expresses a wish to fly again soon (Dahl 1968, 113). Since Dahl left much of his original letter unchanged, he must have felt that what was said in the letter was fairly accurate. Also, fifty years after the crash he most likely didn't have any new memories to add. Since he already told us that he wrote *Going Solo* to clarify what really happened, insertion of the letter seems to provide corroboration, and give his "re-telling" added credibility. Memory can be a tricky thing. Bruce Jackson says that "[t]he problem with the things you remember well: the fact that you remember them well doesn't mean that they happened" (Jackson 2007, 28). But, given the traumatic event, maybe using the letter was the only way for him to reconstruct what had happened. It certainly demonstrates how important the letters were to him in writing *Going Solo*.

If so much of the letter was used, what can we learn from the parts Dahl decided to leave out? Unpublished sections of this letter including a beginning passage that starts with:

> At last I'm allowed to write, but I'm told that it's got to be a short letter. Yesterday I received eight letters from you and one from Alf and one from Else and one from Asta, dating back from July right up to the last one you wrote in October from the

> cellar at Oakwood. They'd been all over Egypt and the desert before finally turning up (RD14/4/38, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 20 Nov 1940, RDMSC).

Likewise, the letter concludes with a passage about people who helped him while in the hospital, including the expatriate Norwegian community in Egypt:

> The good ladies of Alex [sic] come to visit us and bring us flowers, and the one Danish one from Ludvicksor [sic] has let us a wireless. The Norwegian colony, consisting of 2 judges who sit on the Mixed Tribunal here, rallied round right from the outset and have been very kind. I believe you've heard from Mrs. Dahl, Judge Dahl's wife, who you used to know at school in Norway (RD14/4/38, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 20 Nov 1940, RDMSC).

The personal nature of the two paragraphs probably contributed to their exclusion. They demonstrate his family "insider" correspondence, and show us some charming bit of intimacy in his letter writing. He warns his anxious family that his letter will be short, before acknowledging the eleven letters he has received, which have traveled all over before arriving to him. To put his mother at ease, he tells of a community of Norwegians, and even a Mrs. Dahl, who has cared for him. These paragraphs may have been excluded because they do not contribute to the intended narrative, but they certainly provide a human element to his family relations.

Going Solo skips ahead, devoting only twenty pages to the crash and recovery, to focus on three incidents not mentioned in any letters: his faith in the doctors, his blind love for Nurse Mary, and the mistreatment of a female worker in the hospital. Faith in doctors is a theme throughout Dahl's life, and probably originated with his experience after his crash. Subsequent books about his life talk about times when he participated actively in his own and his families' medical care and rehabilitation after serious illnesses. For instance, it is precisely because of his trust in doctors, that he recognizes the seriousness of his wife Pat's

condition and has a specialist meet them at the hospital, before her aneurysm has been diagnosed (Sturrock 2010, 409). This action may have saved her life, and does contribute to her eventual recovery. He remains respectful of the medical profession for the rest of his life.

During Dahl's recovery from the crash, he uses *Going Solo* to give voice to the worry that he will be blind for the rest of his life. He says that the thought of blindness didn't frighten or depress him. "In a world where war was all around me and where I had ridden in dangerous little aeroplanes that roared and zoomed and crashed and caught fire, blindness not to mention life itself, was no longer important" (Dahl 1986, 108). The statement expresses more of older Dahl's introspective nature. His letters focus instead on his return to duty, saying "there's nothing very much wrong with me; I've merely had a serious concussion. They say I certainly won't fly for another 6 months, and were going to invalid me home on the next convoy." He adds that he wants to get on with flying, and when sent home, to "go normally" (RD14/4/40, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 6 Dec 1940, RDMSC). In the letter, he appears to be a normal, resilient young man who doesn't see mortality as an option, much less an obstacle to be overcome. Young Dahl is either oblivious to the possibility of permanent blindness, or chooses not to mention it so as not to worry his mother. Either way, the contrast between youthful Dahl versus the older, introspective one, demonstrates how memory is altered through perspective. *Going Solo* clearly voices the reflective characteristic of memory, and an older man's need to voice his fears.

Dahl and Women

Except for the female members of the Dahl family, women do not appear as often as men in Dahl's books, letters, or life. Those that do appear seldom play a positive role.

Acknowledging this fact, he inserts two stories of women into *Going Solo,* both during his recovery and hospital stay. In the first one, Dahl proceeds to fall madly in love with his daily care nurse, Mary Welland. While temporarily blinded, he listens to her lovely voice and creates a picture of her as actress Myrna Loy in his mind (Dahl 1986, 111). With eyes wide open, he sees Mary for the first time, and he says that she "became a human instead of a dream and my passion evaporated" (Dahl 1986, 115). Perhaps the image came from his own marriage to Patricia Neal, an American movie star, whose glamour and reputation paralleled Loy's image. Both women were popular at the same time and famous for their portrayal of a more down-to-earth beauty. The story of Mary Welland may have been the product of Dahl's recent failed marriage to Neal, which taught him that all women, except for his own family, were not to be trusted and had feet of clay in the end.

While blindness might have given Nurse Mary a beautiful face in Dahl's mind, memory and experience may have had more to do with his feelings towards her. In his letters, there were three un-named hospital sisters took care of him. Lacking any references to beauty or romance, he tells his mother that he spent her gift of Christmas money to purchase gold watches for each of the three women (RD14/4/40, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 6 Dec 1940, RDMSC). It is possible that the "three hospital sisters" fused into an image of Mary. And lack of romantic overtones might have had more to do with her religious affiliations than Dahl's newly acquired clear vision. Since Dahl wrote *Going Solo* at a time when his reputation among women was low, due to his infidelity and divorce, he may have included his memory of Nurse Mary to show his romantic side. In light of his experiences and his re-

creation of Sister Mary in *Going Solo*, his memory clearly was altered by the events of his present life.

Dahl uses *Going Solo* to acknowledge the mistreatment of women working at the hospital. During his recovery, he observes the following scene:

> I saw a medical orderly coming down this corridor carrying a very large tray with a white cloth over it. Walking in the opposite direction towards the orderly was a middle-aged woman, probably somebody from the hospital clerical staff. When the orderly came level with the woman, he suddenly whipped away the cloth from the tray and pushed the tray towards the woman's face. On the tray there lay the entire quite naked amputated leg of a soldier. I saw the poor woman reel backwards. I saw the foul orderly roar with laughter and replace the cloth and walk on…. I have never forgotten that illustration of man's repulsive behaviour towards woman. (Dahl 1986, 117)

Like many of Dahl's parables, this one demonstrates how an innocent being, in this case a middle-aged woman, is mistreated by a crude orderly. He ends the tale by condemning "man's repulsive behaviour." As another example of one of the many stories placed in *Going Solo*, it serves to express yet another parable-like episode with a message voicing his disapproval of injustice. Since *Going Solo* was written only three years after Dahl's divorce, the public, who sided with Neal, adopted her nickname of "Roald the Rotten"(Neal 1988, 294) for him. Since the story does not appear in any of his letters, it may have been intentionally told to help repair Dahl's image as a bad husband and even a women-hater.

Most women that cross Dahl's path fall under the category of caregiver. After his release from the hospital, he is sent to the Peels home in Alexandria, Egypt to recuperate. He mentions Dorothy Peel, wife of Major Peel, in both *Going Solo* and letters, saying "I was lucky to have found such a splendid place among such kind people" (Dahl 1986, 117). In his letter, he adds that he presented Dorothy with a custom made lampshade, which will be

signed in indelible pencil by the "legions of people she cares for" (RD14/4/44, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 29 Jan 1941, RDMSC). After Dahl finishes fighting in Greece, he and a few survivors return to the Peel home for showers and breakfast (Dahl 1986, 117). But the role of the Peels is to act more like a home away from home, and in that sense, Dorothy can be seen as a surrogate mother.

Only one woman, Leslie Pares, a friend of his sister Alf stands out in his letters. Their paths cross accidentally in a hotel bar in Cairo, while Dahl waits for re-assignment to his squadron. He introduces her as "the first woman I've met since I left home to whom I can swear or say what I bloody well like without her turning a hair – trained by Alf I should imagine, well trained at that" (RD14/4/48, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 7 Mar 1941, RDMSC). He likes her because she reminds him of his own family. Comfortable with Dahl's bawdy humor and dirty jokes, her rough and ready image fits with the characters of his mother and sisters. Leslie gives us our only glimpse into Dahl's preferences in women outside his family. It shows us the real reason why the relationship with sweet Sister Mary was doomed from the beginning. Dahl's re-write of memory allowed him exclude Leslie and all women of interest from *Going Solo.* If women such as this existed, they were insubstantial to him and didn't impact his life in any way he saw as significant. This is how memory works. It may not be that he forgot these women, but that he just decided to be selective and dismiss people from his stories whom he viewed as "extras" in his life.

Recovery and Diversions

Bruce Jackson says storytellers, like lawyers, politicians, and reporters, are "[p]rofessional dream weavers . . . spin[ning] stories deliberately and consciously, seeking to

manipulate us" (Jackson 2007, 79). Likewise, Dahl intentionally chooses to leave out certain themes from letters which didn't advance his story in *Going Solo*. Shortly after the long crash-related letter in *Going Solo*, Dahl wrote a shorter one page letter saying that all of his belongings, except his gold watch, cigarette case, and cameras, were blown up in his tent in the desert. In it he also says that he is still not allowed to read or listen to music (RD14/4/40, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 6 Dec 1940, RDMSC). From the Peels home, he writes of the slow progress of his recovery, telling his sister Else that his "old brain seems a bit sluggish still. Whereas before I used to play quite a moderate game of bridge, I find that at the moment I can't seem to remember a single card or even formulate a simple plan for playing a hand" (RD14/4/43, Roald Dahl letter to sister Else, 10 Jan 1941, RDMSC). None of these weaknesses or setbacks makes it into *Going Solo*. The image of Dahl as mentally confused or depressed does not fit with the personal narrative he is crafting for his audience. This is an example of how selective memory is used to advance Dahl's story.

Music and books are a common theme throughout all of Dahl's letters demonstrating his more sensitive self. During his stay with the Peels, he says that his "chief joy still is the gramophone," discussing composers he knows well, including Beethoven. To this end, he tells of combining his reading of Matthew Arnold's poem "The Scholar-Gipsy" with listening to Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony (RD14/4/43, Roald Dahl letter to sister Else, 10 Jan 1941, RDMSC). Arnold was popular poet in Victorian England. "The Scholar-Gipsy" tells of a scholar who joins a band of gypsies, learns their secrets and then renounces mortal men and their lifestyle. The hero gains a life removed from sickness and doubt, achieving a pleasing melancholy. Set in the rural pastoral settings of the Oxford countryside near where

the Dahl family lived, the poem may have brought him closer to his family. Dahl certainly experiences a degree of sickness and doubt similar to the poem's hero. The combination of peaceful music and introspective poem, paints the picture of a melancholy young man, far from home, recovering from an unexpected injury.

As Dahl recovers and returns to light active duty, he becomes a censor, "inspecting telegrams and other things" (RD14/4/46, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 10 Feb 1941, RDMSC). Early letters before the crash demonstrate his ability to self-censor his writing. Few if any of his letters contain the marks and deletions from censors. But after he becomes a censor, he starts to work at outwitting the system. When he wants to write about what sort of plane he will be flying, he says that it is "the same kind as Douglas Bader uses" (RD14/4/48, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 7 Mar 1941, RDMSC). Bader, a popular war hero, appears to fly a plane that even Dahl's mother would have recognized. The next letter tells his mother to "take Else's age and multiply it by four and subtract twelve" (RD14/4/49, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 22 Mar 1941, RDMSC), to tell her that he will soon be returning to the 80th Squadron. Later he tells her that his squadron is reassembling in "the place where we had our first big celebration after leaving Iraq about 9 months ago" (RD14/4/54, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 15 May 1941, RDMSC). With few letters to tell us about his post-crash experience, these hints show us the way he communicated insider information, maintaining a connection to his family from afar. These subtle hints are not part of *Going Solo*, and have been replaced by larger episodes of reconstructed memories, which are intentionally placed in the narrative with new meaning attached to them. These sorts of examples may have been too simple to turn into parables which Dahl uses to tell what he has learned.

Dahl's Return to Duty: Touchstones of Memory

Dahl devotes the largest portion of *Going Solo* to the shortest, least personally documented part of his three-years away from home. Only seven letters talk about his return to active duty and experiences flying fighter planes because, as he says in a letter, he spent much of his time jumping from place to place (RD14/4/48, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 7 Mar 1941, RDMSC). So, unlike the earlier stories, much of the second half of *Going Solo* was written by Dahl's older self recalling feelings and impressions of what it was like to fight in the war. In order to ground the stories in fact, Dahl relies heavily on historical touchstones such as names of places and people which would be recognized by those who remembered the war.

While visiting the Dahl archive, I looked at his two "idea books." These were note books, which acted as sketchbooks containing brief descriptions of written ideas. When Dahl used an idea, he checked it off in the book. In a like manner, he also kept an address book in a drawer of the writing hut. It contained the names and contact information for many of the people he had met in his life. The inside front cover of the address book has "80 SQUADRON, GREECE," written in bold along with a list of thirteen names including Pat Pattle, David Coke, and others (Sturrock 2010, 139). Like the idea book, the address book gives the impression of something he valued which was waiting to be used in a story. Dahl finally put those names to use when writing *Going Solo* in order to memorialize those he served with and to convince those who remembered the names that he was a part of the action.

Like the first half of the book, Dahl uses characters to guide us through the action. But, unlike his earlier characters, most of these characters are historically significant. They serve a dual function of both developing the dialogue and imparting basic truths that Dahl wishes us to learn from his narrative. Even so, they remain shallow one-dimensional beings similar to folktale characters, existing only when paired with Dahl. Elliot Oring says that expert witnesses such as these are yet another rhetorical device used to support claims of truth (Oring 2008, 142). The use of real characters by name serves to add credibility to Dahl's testimonial style narrative. He uses famous war heroes, brave soldiers, and a German Jewish refuge to serve this purpose.

The first guide, David Coke, is a pilot that Dahl encounters upon his return to the 80th Squadron in Greece. In *Going Solo*, we are told that Coke is of noble lineage and would have become the Earl of Leicester had he not been killed during the war (Dahl 1982, 129). Coke's experience, in contrast to Dahl, allows him to serve a role as both mentor and expert witness. Dahl uses Coke as a sounding board, to ask and answers questions he and his audience has, such as:

> 'Have the Germans really got a thousand planes in Greece?' I asked him.
>
> 'It seems likely,' he said. 'Yes, I think they have. You see Greece is only the beginning for them. After they've taken Greece, they intend to push on south and take Crete as well. I'm sure of that….'
>
> Then David Coke said, 'As you don't seem to know anything at all, I'd better try to help you. What would you like to know?' (Dahl 1982, 130).

This dialogue serves as a device to update the audience on how dire situation that Dahl has returned to is. Since he has missed six months of activity, he has quite a bit of catching up to do. Coke takes Dahl under his wing, giving him advice on how to fight the Germans, and not

die in the process. It is Coke's voice that Dahl hears in his mind as he attacks his first German planes alone. After narrowly surviving, Coke warns him never to get himself in a position of compromise again (Dahl 1982, 137-40). Coke is the voice of an experienced mentor and friend to Dahl in the chaos of war.

Dahl uses the well-known battle of Athens on the twentieth of April as another historical touchstone. After surviving heavy fighting, Dahl returns to camp and has the following exchange with Coke: "'I think we're going to get killed,' I said. 'So do I,' he said. 'You can have the basin in a moment(;) I left a bit of water in the jug just in case you happened to come back'" (Dahl 1982, 154). Saving a bit of water in the jug after the toughest day of fighting is Dahl's way of using metaphor to express his conflicting feelings of futility and hope. Later, when they share olives and wine, Dahl asks "do you think we'll come out of here alive?" to which Coke replies "we'll be dead within twenty-four hours" (Dahl 1982, 175). The contrast between temporary comfort in the midst of continuing danger works to drive the message home again of the discord Dahl feels in the face of war. Except for a brief encounter in Cairo, Coke disappears when Dahl leaves Greece. Coke is entirely absent from any of Dahl's letters. Light pencil lines mark the section of an original letter used by Dahl in *Going Solo* to talk of his experience in Greece. He says "we really had the hell of a time in Greece….taking on half the German Airforce with literally a handful of fighters" (RD14/4/54, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 15 Apr 1941, RDMSC; Dahl 1982:128). In *Going Solo*, one black and white photograph features Coke, with his features heavily shaded, kneeling next to a small dog (Dahl 1982, 128). Given that Coke, along with most of the 80th

squadron, died during the war, no collaborative stories are available to corroborate Dahl's memories.

Another touchstone character in *Going Solo* is Flight-Lieutenant Pat Pattle, who fought and died at the Battle of Athens. Dahl's recollections memorialize Pattle as "the greatest fighter ace in the Middle East," and credit him with shooting down more planes than "any of the famous or glamorized Battle of Britain aces" (Dahl 1986, 149). Dahl's hero worship is balanced by personal observations of the pilot as "a very small man and very soft-spoken, [who] possessed the deeply wrinkled doleful face of a cat who knew that all nine of its lives had already been used up" (Dahl 1986, 149). While Dahl never interacts directly with Pattle, their names are linked on web sites devoted to the war and the commonwealth. Dahl is said to have modeled his pilot/hero in *The Gremlins* to be a cross between Coke and Pattle. By placing Pattle in *Going Solo*, Dahl ties himself to history.

Before leaving Greece, Dahl volunteers for a secret mission to deliver a package back to the Elevsis airfield. It is here that he meets Mr. Carter, who is dressed like a civilian in a pale gray suit and hat, standing alone amid the wreckage of their former base. Dahl recalls the experience saying: "I took an instant liking to Mr. Carter. I knew very well he was going to stay behind when the Germans took over. He was going underground. . . . (H)e would probably be caught and tortured and shot through the head" (Dahl 1982, 171). Dahl uses this encounter with Carter to show us what a dutiful, brave soldier looks like. As the recollection of the older Dahl, it expresses the sense of loss he feels, at present, about his missions and the war.

One of Dahl's most memorable exchanges in *Going Solo* occurs with an unnamed German Jewish refugee leader. Their encounter occurs as Dahl is on a mission, inspecting a small hidden runway near Haifa called Ramat David. At this outpost, he is surprised to find a community of women and children, led by "a huge man with a black beard who looked like the Prophet Isaiah and spoke like a parody of Hitler" (Dahl 1986, 195). In simplistic terms, the leader tells Dahl that the war has displaced the Jewish people, who are now without a country (Dahl 1986, 198). Three photos labeled as Ramat David appear in *Going Solo* (Dahl 1986, 199-201), but are not mentioned in any of Dahl's letters. After a brief encounter, the leader walks Dahl to his plane, thanks him for his fine work and wishes him luck. The man disappears from *Going Solo* just as Coke, Pattle, and Carter, after delivering his message. This shows us how Dahl fabricates both characters and events to move his story along. Once their purpose has been served, they are discarded from the narrative, no longer a necessary part of what is to come.

But the significance of this encounter can be traced to current events in Dahl's life. Just three years before *Going Solo* was published, Dahl wrote a rare book review for Tony Clifton and Catherine Leroy's book, *God Cried.* The review romanticizes Palestine and opposes a Jewish state in the harshest of terms. The Jewish community rallied against Dahl, labeling him as an anti-Semite. It is said that this ill-judged public utterance cost Dahl the knighthood he so greatly coveted (Sturrock 2010, 557). Amanda Conquy, the vice-chair of the Roald Dahl Foundation, provided me with a letter addressing this issue. In it, she acknowledges that Dahl was "undoubtedly an outspoken, even subversive man," who expressed heart-felt views and welcomed debate. She says "Dahl's lack of political

awareness shows through…and even those who recognized that this was not written by a pen of an anti-Semitic openly criticized Roald Dahl for confusing Zionists with Jews" (Conquy 2010). While the book review exposed his weaknesses, *Going Solo* allowed Dahl to try to fix the situation in the way he knew best. After their brief encounter, Jewish leader says to Dahl, "you have a lot to learn. . . but you are a good boy" (Dahl 1986, 199). By writing the encounter into *Going Solo*, Dahl uses his ability as a storyteller to return to the discussion he started and present, what is for him, a positive resolution into his narrative.

Dahl uses the second half of *Going Solo* to tie his experiences to those of other war veterans. By using historical touchstones, Dahl gains collaborators and brings an element of truthfulness to his stories. Following the death of so many of his squadron members, Dahl's voice stands alone. This allows us to see Dahl as a soloist, a raconteur who has been to war and returned to tell the tale. He writes *Going Solo* to relive his experiences as a war hero, recounting his fights, encounters, and disillusionment with the war and its outcome. Because much of the past has not been recorded in his letters, his memory of the past in present times is memorialized. Dahl uses his narrative to fix problems that the present Dahl is surrounded by. These problems include his marriage, his health, and his growing unpopularity with the Jewish community.

CHAPTER VIII

GOING SOLO AS A NARRATIVE OF LANDSCAPE

Yi-Fu Tuan, scholar of humanistic geography, said that time and place are related in three ways: "time as motion or flow and place as pause in the temporal current; attachment to place as a function of time, captured in the phrase, 'it takes time to know a place;' and place as time made visible, or place as memorial to times past" (Tuan 1977, 179). By choosing to return to faraway places, Dahl allowed *Going Solo* to show us three years of time he sees as important in his life. He tells us that the places he had experienced seemed to remain strongly rooted in his mind, saying "I am writing this forty-five years afterwards, but still retain an absolutely clear picture" (Dahl 1986, 142). Philosopher Charlie Huenemann says, "Memories often grow less accurate, but seldom less vivid" (Huenemann 2011). The choice to return and tell stories from the war demonstrates one of the major places where Dahl's life had experienced a pause. He felt the need to return to it, rewrite it if necessary, and memorialize it in his life.

In the second part of *Going Solo,* Dahl's stories shift from telling us things that he found interesting about his life in Africa to a focus on *where* his emotions took him. After the chapter "Survival" where he recovers from his crash, *Going Solo* begins to move quickly from place to place. Nearly all the chapters have numerous photographs which show the action he writes about. Only "The Ammunition Ship" and "The Battle of Athens – The Twentieth of April" as chapters, lack visual references, probably due to the fact that they talk mostly of flying. Some of the chapters are even named after locations such as Argos, Palestine, and Syria, which have photos of the land associated with them. The visual

emphasis is so strong in *Going Solo* that it makes one wonder if he wrote the stories around the photos.

Each of the thirty photographs included by Dahl in *Going Solo* is tilted on the page with a handwritten description below it. The photos and their placement make the book seem more like a scrapbook of memories than a memoir of the war. By displaying them in this manner, he formulates a visual record to support his narrative journey. Dahl's love of photography is repeated throughout his letters as well. They speak often of photographs he has taken and forwarded on to his family to show them the things that he talks about. Likewise, he makes regular requests to his mother and sisters to send him their photos. These incidents are part of a much larger ideal which pervades his writing, namely, the capture of time as a reflection of place with photographic intent and interest. Dahl's narrative captures and memorializes strong feelings encountered during an intense and important transition period in his life. Unlike the shadowy black and white photos in *Going Solo*, the gap of time between his letters and his memoir have allowed the pictures in his mind to become much clearer and more focused. They point to specific events which have become more real to him as time has passed.

Like the photographs, Dahl's visual and verbal references are assertions of truth in his narrative. Elliott Oring says that "assertions are those remarks that comment on the truth of the narrative," which are used to strengthen the rhetoric of truth in legends (Oring 2008, 141). This device is used by Dahl when recalling some of his most visually-oriented memories. These examples are interesting when viewed not only for what is said, but also how it is supported as truth. Here are three examples:

> You may not believe it but I can remember having to lift my plane just a tiny fraction to clear a stone wall.… (Dahl 1986, 145)
>
> It was the first of these sorties that I will never forget. It stands out like a sheet of flame in my memory. (Dahl 1986, 148)
>
> I still have a very clear picture of the inside of that hut and of the bearded man with the bright fiery eyes who kept talking to me in riddles. (Dahl 1986, 198)

Each of these phrases is used to convince us that what Dahl is writing about *actually* happened. In this way, *Going Solo* is as much about Dahl's ability to tell stories as it is about making the reader believe that his memories are true. Through the use of narrative, Dahl crafts a picture of what he believes, or wishes to believe, happened to him during the war.

His attachment to photography mirrors Dahl's style as a writer, where he uses flat characters, exaggerations, contrasts, and parables to tell stories that unfold much in the style of folktales. In *The BFG*, for example, we learn little about the main character Sophie except that she is small, good, and smart. The BFG, or Big Friendly Giant, is large, pleasant, and uncommon, especially in contrast to the other giants (Dahl 1982). Like his stories, photographs portray only the action which is shown, freezing time and place, and reflecting the visible world. This tendency towards the concrete helped him establish himself as a writer of children's literature, and *Going Solo* is no exception.

Mapping with Words

In a rare interview posted on "Roald Dahl – The Official Web Site," Dahl tells Todd McCormack what writing is like for him:

> [I]t's rather like going on a very long walk, across valleys and mountains and things, and you get the first view of what you see and you write it down. Then you walk a bit further, maybe you go up onto the top of a hill, and you see something else. Then you write that and you go on like that, day after day, getting different views of the same

> landscape really. The highest mountain on the walk is obviously the end of the book, because it's got to be the best view of all, when everything comes together and you can look back and see that everything you've done all ties up. But it's a very, very long, slow process. (Dahl 1988)

This interview took place two years after *Going Solo* was published. It uses visual analogies to describe his writing process, expressing how he uses "different views of the same landscape." Demonstrating his strong personal connection between the visual and narrative, his writing process reflects his fascination with photography and landscape.

We can interpret and understand Dahl's narrative by examining the meaning he attaches to places. Kent Ryden refers to places found in essays and personal narratives as invisible landscapes, which he says

> Freezes place, arresting its headlong change, resisting its inherent ephemerality. In this way it duplicates an important function of an ordinary map….[those] who draw maps with words accomplish the same function: they are metaphorical mapmakers, recognizing the abiding value and fascination of the world's landscape and capturing them on paper. Their real field though, is the invisible landscapes overlying the visible ones, the historical peaks and emotional valleys which personal and collective experience have carved there. (Ryden 1993, 246)

The invisible map Dahl presents us with shows us his story in landscape, pointing to the locations where his personal narrative collides with history and emotions. It presents us with labels for his photographic recall which point to specific spots, saying "here's where I felt this." *Going Solo* is can be seen as a narrative map, one where he attaches emotions to locations. While flying, we are given his altitude and location in Greece above Khalkis as a prelude to a description of what he is feeling. His monologue acknowledges "a single solitary goat, brown and white, wandering on the bare rock. 'Hello Goat . . . I'll bet you don't know the Germans are going to have you for supper before you're very much older'" (Dahl 1986, 135). While details of the narrative place us in the cockpit, the one-sided dialogue with the

goat connects us emotionally to his experience. Many fighter pilots in the R.A.F. may have experienced the same landscape, but Dahl tells us what it feels like to be there and to fear the unknown. There are many examples in *Going Solo* of Dahl's connection between places the war took him and the emotions he felt in this second part.

By combining his personal experience with the collective experiences of war, Dahl expresses his connectedness to a larger universe. We've already seen how Dahl recognized elements an "otherness" quality of the Empire Builders he met in Africa. This same quality of "otherness," or lack of fitting in, is a part of his personal journey. Born in Wales, raised by Norwegians, and attending British school, he lacked a personal connection to one place as he grew to adulthood. As he traveled throughout Africa, Egypt, Greece, and Libya, he continued to be a foreigner in exotic places. But when he entered the military, something changed. He suddenly became part of a larger community, the military and the war effort. *Going Solo* expresses how it might have felt to belong for the first time, and to share an emotional connection to historical events and people. By telling of his experiences from the Battle of Athens and Flight-Lieutenant Pattle, he makes history into his story, bringing emotions along with him.

Dahl uses his memory of landscape to help him return to an emotional time in his life. Yi- Fu Tuan says that "place can acquire deep meaning through the steady accretion of sentiment over the years," although on the other hand one brief powerful emotion can illuminate a place for life - "the quality and intensity of experience matters more than simple duration" (Tuan 1977, 33; 198). This personal narrative releases emotions which allow Dahl to re-live his life, formulating both places and events through stories. The intensity of his

experience tells us why he chose this three year time-frame. It represents a full-circle in his life where he leaves, has many things happen to him, and returns home to his mother in the end.

There's No Place Like Home

Throughout *Going Solo* Dahl tells stories in the form of parables to teach us lessons that he had learned throughout his life. Nowhere is this more apparent than when he brings *Going Solo* to a close. The final chapter begins with Dahl finally being "invalided home to Britain." He drives himself to Sierra Leone and boards a series of troop-ships destined for Liverpool (Dahl 1986, 202-3). Upon arrival, an operator tells him that his mother's telephone in Kent has been disconnected months ago, probably because "'[s]he'll have moved . . . she'll probably have been bombed out like all the rest of them'" (Dahl 1986, 205). After taking a train to London, he calls his half-sister Ellen. She tells him that his mother and sisters now live in Buckinghamshire and gives him their phone number (Dahl 1986, 207). He calls immediately, spends the night with his sister, and catches an early train and bus to her cottage. The emotion of his return captured in last few lines of the book, where he says "I caught sight of my mother when the bus was still a hundred yards away . . . . I flew down the steps of the bus straight into the arms of the waiting mother." Pictured on the same page is a very quaint cottage labeled "Mama's Cottage" (Dahl 1986, 210). The chapter leaves no doubt that he has returned home at last.

Like many events in his life, Dahl rehearsed the script for his emotional return long before he wrote *Going Solo*. In the 1940s, his second short story "Only This" tells of a mother waiting in her cottage for her only son's return from the war. The mother is magically

transported to her son's side when his plane is shot down. She helps him escape but is not able to save his life. The story ends as she dies in her own bedroom (Dahl 2006, 17-22). By the time he wrote *Going Solo,* Dahl must have spent a great deal of time thinking about how his mother would have felt. This ending demonstrates his need to tell stories from "different views of the same landscape" (Dahl 1988). And never one to let a good ending go unwritten, Dahl he continued to re-craft his return to his mother long after she died.

This is one area of Dahl's personal narrative where his letters tell another story of his return. All the envelopes from the time of his crash onward display his mother's new return address as Wayside Cottage in Buckinghamshire. He acknowledges her location in a letter where he asks her to visit the Brigadier General Russell's fifteen year old daughter Anne, who is attending a boarding school in nearby Great Missenden (RD14/4/44, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 29 Jan 1941, RDMSC). While he may not have had her telephone number, he would most definitely have known that she was living in Buckinghamshire. Likewise, his mother might not have known the exact time of his arrival, but chances are she knew he had been discharged and was expecting him. In true folktale style, Dahl writes "the highest mountain . . . the best view of all" (Dahl 1988) into his fabricated story of his return. This was, most certainly, the high point of his three year experience.

By ending his story in his mother's arms, Dahl shows us that he has returned home at last. Yi-Fu Tuan observes that "a person in the process of time invests bits of his emotional life in his home, and beyond the home in his neighborhood" (Tuan 1974, 99). Older Dahl uses the story of his return to England to finally express his emotional investment in a place he now calls home. In contrast, young Dahl's life could be seen as lacking a home, since he

had been displaced at boarding schools for most of his life. We have already discussed his feelings of "otherness," which shows that he never had a place of belonging in his adolescence. By the time Dahl wrote *Going Solo*, he had lived in Buckinghamshire for over thirty years. With this amount of time invested, it must have felt like he was returning home. Perhaps he wrote *Going Solo* to relive this emotion-filled homecoming, of his return to a place he knew.

It is true at the most basic level that one can find home only by leaving it. When Dahl returns to England, the rolling green hills and open countryside of Buckinghamshire will become the only place he owns land, puts down roots, and calls home. Kent Ryden says that most people invest their emotion in the landscapes which have the most meaning associated with them, identifying homes, favorite haunts, or childhood as typical of landscape narrative. He says that "such places, weaving themselves inextricably into the fabric of daily existence, gather to themselves some of the same emotions that we feel toward any other partner in life" (Ryden 1993, 39). Since Dahl lacked a connection to childhood homes and haunts, he returned instead to the only partner and home he knew, his mother and her cottage. The landscape of his mother and her home is the nearest proximity to what he knows and calls home. While leaving home allowed Dahl to become an adult, returning home gave him the sense of belonging he desired.

CHAPTER IX

CONQUERING GIANTS: JOURNEYS INTO *THE BFG*

After examining the many ways in which Dahl tells his story in *Going Solo*, it is valuable to see how these ideas influence his children's books. *The BFG* is a perfect choice for comparison since it was written only four years prior to *Going Solo* and is autobiographical in the use of characters and settings. It is the story of a young orphan named Sophie who is taken from her bed by the BFG, a friendly giant. He takes her to his cave where she learns about the nine people-eating giants he lives with and sees his collection of dreams. Eventually Sophie learns to trust the BFG and together they decide to capture the nasty giants. Using a dream concoction, they persuade the Queen of England to help them. They are successful, and rewarded, and the book ends happily (Dahl 1982). The story demonstrates Dahl's storytelling ability in it most magical form, where children are transported to fantasy lands, experience magic, and meet larger-than-life characters. Through this adventure, we learn how the world treats its many marginalized inhabitants, including children.

Dahl uses the conventions of folktales or *Märchen* to give *The BFG* its lasting appeal. In doing so, he creates what could be called a modern literary fairy tale. But in order to make this determination, a review of the characters and episodes is needed. Folklore theorists offer two methods by which literature can be examined as folklore. Richard Dorson suggests that a connection to folk materials should be made in three areas: biographical knowledge, internal evidence embedded in the literature, and collaborative evidence of items found to be traditional in nature (Dorson 1957, 2). Alan Dundes' approach adds that the method should

include the identification of similarities, and the interpretation and delineation of differences (Dundes 1965, 137). In order to fully understand the use of folklore in *The BFG*, it is necessary to use both of these methods to place it within the tradition of folklore in literature.

Borrowed Episodes: Memory and Experience

Dahl's life is reflected in some of the biographical experiences of the characters and episodes from *The BFG.* The main character, Sophie, shares the same name as both his mother and granddaughter. Granddaughter Sophie, his first and only grandchild, was born in 1977. One needs only to imagine Dahl holding young Sophie, who would have been five when the book was published, to see why he would have written a story empowering a small girl. Likewise, Dahl fashioned the BFG in his own likeness, having a "long stooped stature, fatherly benevolence, and love of language" (Nicholson 2000, 317). Dahl even makes mention of owning a pipe similar to the BFG's as he says "I lost my best pipe in Norway, so I bought a beauty in Oslo with a stem a foot long—very nice to smoke when reading" (RD14/2/2, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 12 Aug 1935, RDMSC). The physical resemblance is unmistakable when comparing photographs of Dahl working in his writing hut with illustrations from the last pages of *The BFG* drawn by Quentin Blake (Dahl 1982, 208). Both Dahl and Sophie can be seen as kindred spirits as well since both lacked a father and a home. They both share feelings of loneliness and abuse as a result of the boarding school type environs where they lived.

Some of the elements of *The BFG* are derived directly from Dahl's memory and experiences growing up. For instance, the long, thin, dream-blowing trumpet used by the BFG is said to come directly from Dahl's visits to Norway. His own maternal grandfather

smoked similar a pipe with a long, flexible stem (Nicholson 2000, 317). Dahl more than likely watched the smoke rise in circles from this very pipe during his annual summer trips. Perhaps he even heard Norwegian tales, full of magic, giants, and fantasy during these visits. Such stories may have influenced the tales he would later tell to his own children, as practice for writing *The BFG.* But this is all speculation since no record of these events in Dahl's life remains. His own summer vacation ended abruptly with his return to boarding school each fall. In a more direct manner, the excessive force yielded by older students and teachers at the schools may have inspired him to write the nine people-eating giants into the story.

Dahl clearly wrote himself and his experiences into *The BFG*. He features a squadron of fighter pilots from the Royal Air Force deployed by the Queen to overcome the loathsome giants. In dialogue reminiscent of *Going Solo,* a fearless pilot says "It's fun going to new places," and also points out that they have just "flown clear off the last page!" of the atlas (Dahl 1982, 185). This section of *The BFG* is clearly autobiographical in nature reflecting Dahl's military service record and love of flying. In his own personal correspondence, he writes of flying in nearly every letter. In a letter written from Egypt only a few months before his crash, he says "We are having a marvellous [sic] time -- flying in the mornings, bathing and perhaps dancing in the evenings" (RD14/4/32, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 28 Aug 1940, RDMSC). Later, after a series of intense air battles, he sends a telegram which begins "We had great fun in Greece" (RD14/4/53, Roald Dahl telegram to Mama, April 1941 RDMSC). These are a few of the many examples of Dahl's excitement at flying in foreign lands, which is echoed in the dialogue found in *The BFG* and in the stories told in *Going Solo*, written four years later.

While the characters and experiences found in *The BFG* have a biographical connection to Dahl, the story itself is structured like a traditional folktale or *Märchen.* Stith Thompson defines *Märchen* as "a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous" (Thompson 1977). Linda Dégh adds that it is "a lengthy and heroic adventurous journey from deprivation to fulfillment" (Dégh 1995, 122). Using these definitions, Dahl's writing in *The BFG* and his other stories reflect the structure of traditional folktales. They take the reader on a journey to the land of giants, where heroes use magic to overcome extraordinary obstacles on the way to fulfillment.

But in order for a story to become part of the folk tradition of storytelling, it must have a connection to an oral tradition, dynamic variation, and demonstrate multiple authors. While these elements are harder to trace in literary folklore, they are no less important in defining the genre. By saying that the bedtime stories he told to his own children became the inspiration for *James and the Giant Peach* and other books (West 1990b, 63), Dahl affirmed that his stories were told aloud and may have changed after they were told.

My initial reason for visiting Dahl's archive was to find evidence in personal letters connecting *The BFG* to the Norse folktales he may have heard as a boy. While direct evidence was never forthcoming, the archive contains two books from his mother, one is an illustrated edition of *Barne-Eventyr av Asbjörnsen og Moe* (Ac66/1 RDMSC), (Translated: *Children's Adventure of Asbjørnsen and Moe),* published in 1901 by Kristiania. The authors Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe compiled this collection of Norwegian folktales and legends, which first appeared in pamphlet form around 1850. Inspired by the success of

the Grimm brothers in Germany, this collection was developed in the context of a national movement to establish a unified spoken language. It is now considered to be the definitive collection of Norwegian folktales (Bozanic 1974, 61).

It is remarkable that the collection by Asbjørnsen and Moe followed Dahl's mother out of Norway, through Wales and England, and even survived the bombings during WWII. The illustrated *Barne-Eventyr* wears the patina of a well-loved book, one that might have been read often to keep the Dahl children's language skills sharp for their annual visits back to Norway. Ingrid Bozanic says that *Barne-Eventyr* and those books that it influences relate meaningfully to the life of a Norwegian child where the availability of children's literature is of limited quantity and subject matter (Bozanic 1974, 65). Dahl's Norwegian heritage was clearly important to his adolescence, as he often emphasized his ability to read and write the language of his grandparents. Alfhild, Dahl's sister, saw the link between her brother's tales and the Norwegian legends they heard growing up, which she said blended humor and fear "combined with a sense of solitary majesty of the natural world" (Sturrock 2010, 61-2). Given the strong ties Dahl felt towards mother, the fact that he kept the book after her death, when so few of her books remain, attests to its importance in his life.

Larger-Than-Life

The BFG is a tale full of proportional exaggerations which serve to amplify many of the contrasts in the story. Alan Dundes identified the amplification of contrasts, such as those between giants and children, as an essential element found in fairy tales (Dundes 1981, 76). Young Sophie observes this exaggeration in her description of the BFG with his giant features, black cloak, very long thin trumpet, and large suitcase (Dahl 1982, 13). Contrasts in

size between the two characters intensify Sophie's fears of the BFG for the reader. The giant's enormous features allow him even greater control, power, and authority over Sophie, and make her appear even smaller and more child-like. Voicing the fears all children have, she says "he is getting ready to eat me . . . . [h]e will probably eat me raw" (Dahl 1982, 23-25). Later she asks "why did you snatch me from my bed?" (Dahl 1982, 31). Her question is more meaningful here as she has been snatched from her bed by a extremely large and scary stranger. It expresses most children's (and parents') basic fears.

Giants figure in a great many fairy tales and stories and continue to be of interest today with the creation of Hagrid the friendly half-giant from the *Harry Potter* series. They are defined by the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* as often having human form, usually male, and almost always cannibalistic. Stith Thompson devoted much energy to classifying the tale-types and motifs devoted to giants, reflecting their many actions and reactions as antagonists in tales (Thompson 1955). The most famous tale of a giant, "Jack and the Beanstalk" (AT328), has been described by psychologists as a phallic and oedipal maturation tale (Bettelheim 1976, 184). The same could be said to be true of *The BFG*, as it clearly demonstrates similar features to a maturation tale. Both Sophie and the BFG take on the challenge of capturing the giants and are rewarded with homes and lifestyles they desire as a result (Dahl 1982, 205). As a precursor to *Going Solo*, the return to home for Sophie and the BFG represents the best of all possible endings for Dahl.

If giants are by their very nature exaggerations, then Dahl uses giants to help the reader visualize the epic proportions of good and bad in *The BFG*. He communicates the ambiguity of human nature by contrasting the BFG with other giants. The nine nasty giants

are described as naked, huge, and ugly with names like Fleshlumpeater, Bonecrusher, and Manhugger. These giants are all male and are formidable opponents because of their strength and their cannibalistic nature. They are said to travel great distances to devour "human beans," each of whom have a unique flavor based on the country of their origin. For instance, the BFG explains that "Turks from Turkey is tasting of turkey" and "Greeks from Greece is all tasting greasy" (Dahl 1982, 26). The giants appear to have no redeeming qualities. In contrast, the BFG is kind, sensitive, ethical, and clever, although not in a conventional way. Dahl's exaggerations are so extreme that they give the characters a simplistic two-dimensional nature expressing only of good and bad in the story.

The storyline of *The BFG* demonstrates an awareness of oral storytelling by Dahl's use of traditional tale motifs. The BFG has exceptionally large ears which are intensely sensitive. These ears give him the ability to hear "all the secret whisperings of the world" (Dahl 1982, 42). The symbolic use of large ears softens the character of the BFG by representing a physical manifestation of his skills as a good listener. As Sophie's trust builds, she moves from riding in the BFG's pocket to riding in his ear while he runs from place to place. Once there, she exclaims that "[n]obody… had ever traveled in greater comfort," and "reclining comfortably in the crevice of the BFG's right ear," she sleeps (Dahl 1982, 133-4). This introduces us to Dahl's version of the ear-sleeper motif (F542), which has been indexed by Stith Thompson. References to the motifs use date back over twenty-five hundred years old with examples found among the people of India, Ethiopia, and Indonesia, among others. It is used by tellers because it can easily be communicated through gestures (Kirtley 1963,

127-8). Dahl's use of this obscure motif in *The BFG*, ties his stories to a rich oral tradition of tales told throughout the world.

"Dahlisms:" Words of Nonsense

Dahl's humorous word-play in *The BFG* begs that the book be read aloud. The abundance of puns, rhymes, jokes, onomatopoeia, alliteration, spoonerisms, and malapropisms builds on a tradition of appreciation for humor and nonsense found in the likes of other children's authors such as Dr. Seuss (Schober 2009, 34). Reflecting a depth of knowledge of language and literature, Dahl transforms many recognizable references. We hear verse from "The Lord's Prayer" as the BFG exclaims "Oh, save our sole! Deliver us from weasels!" (Dahl 1982, 82). Advice is given in the form of anti-proverbs uttered by the BFG, as he tells us that "two rights don't make a left" (Dahl 1982, 177), and some people are "like peas out of a poddle" (Dahl 1982, 115). The BFG mixes up literary allusion as well, stating that the author "Dahl's Chickens" wrote *Nicholas Nickleby* (Dahl 1982, 113). These memorable verbal acrobatics are humorous and contribute much to the oral qualities of *The BFG*. When read aloud, they are remembered and repeated by adult and child alike. This feature gives Dahl's writing a life of its own long after the book end, and contributes to the oral tradition of future generations.

Similar to *Märchen*, taboo subjects addressed in *The BFG* are seen as humorous so that the reader may accept them as less offensive. An example of this idea from traditional folklore can be seen in the Palestinian folktale "The Rich Man and the Poor Man." In the tale, the poor man's wife passes gas, and because she has done so in public sees her reputation as ruined. She asks that the "[e]arth open up and swallow her." While under the

surface of the earth, she searches for her fart. This amuses the people below who say "[f]olks must be crazy where you come from." Finally, she finds her fart "wearing a cashmere suit with a fez on his head," and receives great rewards for her misfortune (Muhawi and Kanaana 1989, 303-306). The tale serves as an excellent example of taboo subjects addressed by stories and is similar to Dahl's treatment of the subject.

An entire chapter in *The BFG* – titled "Frobscottle and Whizzpoppers" – is devoted to euphemistic discussion of flatulence (Dahl 1982, 65-66). Dahl uses the nonsense word "whizzpopping" in as a codified reference for passing gas. The BFG and Sophie use this silly word to talk further about its humorous outcome. The BFG states that "[e]veryone is whizzpopping." Sophie replies by pointing out the inappropriate nature of the discussion, saying "[b]ut where I come from it is not polite to talk about it." The BFG responds with childlike innocence, saying "[r]edunculous! . . . If everyone is making whizzpoppers, then why not talk about it?" (Dahl 1982, 67). Not only does the innocent giant talk about the taboo subject, but he also questions why any discussion, which describes a naturally occuring function, should be seen as inappropriate. During his time in Africa, Dahl's own personal letters reflect his early attraction to the subject. He writes about "hornblowing," his euphemism for flatulence shared with his mother, on numerous occasions (RD/14/3/22, Roald Dahl letter to Mama, 5 Feb 1939, RDMSC). Dahl used a substitute word in letters and *The BFG* to allow himself and the reader to talk about the unmentionable. Both the Palestinian folktale and *The BFG* give the audience permission to laugh at themselves and others.

The made-up words used in *The BFG* are comparable to Dahl's many riddles inserted in his letters to work around the censors during his military days. Before embarking on the adventure of writing *The BFG*, Dahl created a list of 283 made-up words which were alphabetized and checked off when used (RD/2/19/1, *The BFG* first draft manuscript, RDMSC). He then took his handwritten list and gave it to someone to type in alphabetical order. This typed and alphabetized version has words crossed off and checked by Dahl as they were used or dismissed. All of this is further indication of how carefully crafted Dahl's writing was from inception through completion. From this alphabet of nonsense, he derived words such as "sloshflunking," "pigswinkles," and "snozzcumber" which litter the pages of the *The BFG* with silliness. The word "snozzcumber" even refers to the most loathsome vegetable on earth (Dahl 1982, 48), and highlights many children's dislike of strange foods. Since we live in a literary age where written words often precede oral expressions, the creation and propagation of these nonsensical words demonstrates Dahl's contribution to the oral communications of the readers. Marie Tatar says that fairy tales operate like magnets "picking up bits and pieces of everyday reality so that they come to be littered with cultural debris" (Tatar 1992, 145). Phrases such as "whizzpopping" and "snozzcumber" used by adults and children out of the context of Dahl's books are examples of his contributions to our "cultural debris." Both the oral nature and dynamic variations of Dahl's books support the use of these "Dahlisms" in contemporary culture and their existence in the vocabulary of future generations.

Dreams: The Magic of the Wonder Tale

Dreams and dream making are important themes in *The BFG*. The unreal nature of dreams is used to introduce elements of wonder in the story. The BFG collects, categorizes, and concocts dreams of all types, which are "very mysterious things" (Dahl 1982, 42). Demonstrating Dahl's real life interest in music, dreams are said to be like music, evoking feelings and having hidden meanings (Dahl 1982, 98). They also serve to administer justice. The BFG uses a nightmare on Fleshlumpeater with "Jack the famous giant-killer" to incite a fight between him and the other giants (Dahl 1982, 92). Like parables in *Going Solo*, dreams are used to deliver messages in *The BFG*, demonstrating that bad behavior will be punished. Dreams are also used for good as in the case of the dream Sophie and the BFG concoct to gain the trust of the Queen (Dahl 1982, 121-2). Dreams are used by Dahl to introduce magic, right wrongs, and progress the story.

Freud says in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that "[t]here can be no doubt that the connections between our typical dreams and fairy tales. . . . are neither few nor accidental" (Freud 1900, 279). Dahl uses dreams in *The BFG* in the same way he uses photos in *Going Solo*; they remind him of things he wants to talk about in the story. When Sophie first meets the BFG, she sees shelves full of dreams, labeled with hand-written descriptions, and kept in small jars. Like Dahl's photos, the BFG says "My labels is only telling bits of it" and "The dreams is usually much longer. The labels is just to remind me" (Dahl 1982, 102). Dahl inserts dreams into his story to make them into magical tales, which make it possible for heroes to outwit giants.

Using the conventions found in *Märchen* carries a penalty. Many of Dahl's books, including *The BFG*, have been criticized as being subversive, overly violent, and simply too scary for sensitive little minds (Culley 1991, 59). Literary critics of children's books have charged that his portrayal of the grotesque through characters, ideas, and events raise topics that children are not capable of dealing with. Some were concerned that the satire in the stories seems primarily directed at adults (Petzold 1992, 190). The consensus of the critics is that his stories, like those collected by the Brothers Grimm, are just not appropriate for young children. On the other hand, psychologists have argued that it is precisely this kind of journey, which allows children to explore their fears that they need to become healthy adults (Stone 1981, 243). Bruno Bettelheim says that "[f]or a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity…. to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination and clarify his emotions" (Bettelheim 1976, 5). With a strong connection to both the best and the worst elements found in folktales, Dahl's writing, whether represented as personal narrative or as *Märchen*, should be examined for its merit in a folklore setting.

Dahl identifies the audience for his children's books as young people between seven and nine years of age, since they are still in the process of becoming "civilized" and may be inclined to see grown-ups as the enemy (West 1990a, 116). While a critic might look at Dahl's books and fear the feelings they may provoke in a young reader, a folklorist will instead see that fear and humor in the stories provide added depth and meaning, and tie them to tradition. His stories are neither simplistic mush nor overly grotesque, but instead reflect traditional fairy tales. *The BFG* presents the reader with heroes who are just like us. They experience extraordinary obstacles and magic, along with moral messages, while in

pursuit of a happy ending. When applying the methods and theories used to analyze folklore in literature to Dahl's writing we see how it connects to the tradition of folktale narratives. His stories are ones full of biographical information, contrast, recognizable motifs, two-dimensional characters, and moralistic simplicity which place them firmly in the genre of literary fairy tale.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

Returning to the analogy of the onion in Dahl's life, this thesis has explored the layers of complexity and complications in both his personal life and writing. As said earlier, Dahl does not easily fit into a category as a writer, contributing fiction and non-fiction to both children and adult audiences. Biographer and literary critic Jeremy Treglown says in his introduction to Dahl's short stories that "[t]he writer's stare is unblinking, and most of his tales are irritants, provocations. Fantastic as Grimm, neat as O'Henry, heartless as Saki, they stick in the mind long after subtler ones have faded: incredible (literally), unforgettable and vengefully funny" (Treglown 2006, ix). Faced with this ambiguity, the literary community has mostly ignored his contributions as a writer since he is mainly viewed as a children's author. But there are other reasons for avoiding him – distaste at his anti-Semitic label, his contentious divorce from a popular American movie star, or his notoriously controversial books for children, which critics have found to be overwrought with racism, violence, grotesqueries, and bathroom humor (Culley 1991, 59–60). It is easy to conclude that he was a difficult person to like for many reasons.

An analysis of Dahl within the realm of folklore offers its own set of challenges. Foremost is categorization, since he tells fairy tale-like stories for children but is not a traditional storyteller and his contributions to storytelling are literary in nature. This makes it even more difficult to tie his writing to a folklore tradition. Nevertheless, many aspects of his storytelling style are traditional in nature such as his use of exaggeration in *The BFG* with its many larger-than-life characters. Dahl's strong attachment to the genre can be seen as a

direct result of the storytelling traditions found in his own family. His mother was known by other relatives for the stories she told. Likewise, Dahl's stories such as *The BFG* should be recognized for their contribution to the genre of literary fairy tales.

Dahl demonstrates many sensibilities of a storyteller in *The BFG* and *Going Solo*, which are both autobiographical in nature. To start with, there are many examples of deliberate choices he makes in what he writes about and how he tells each story. In *Going Solo*, Dahl creates four very odd characters to communicate in an exaggerated way how he felt about British colonialism in Africa. He uses animals, specifically his pet Dog Samka, to express his own sexual fantasies and personal flaws. The book is full of parables of lions, snakes, elephants, and scorpions, which allow him to communicate moralistic messages to his audience. Stories such as "An African Tale" show us how Dahl's writing was influenced by legends he may have heard or read about in newspapers. Likewise, examples such as the ear-sleeping episode in *The BFG* point to a broader awareness of traditional storytelling motifs. Much of his writing remains in one's memory long after reading because of the word choices, literary devices, and stories he chose to tell.

By reading Dahl's personal letters along with *Going Solo*, the dual nature of memory becomes apparent. Dahl had experienced much change in his life during the nearly fifty-year gap from when the letters were written and to when he crafted *Going Solo* for a more general audience. The writing reflects a transformation in Dahl from homesick young son on his first lengthy adventure away from home, to mature adult as husband, father, and even grandfather. By the time he wrote *Going Solo*, Dahl used the voices of his past self to re-create the character of himself anew in his narrative. In this way, young Dahl can be viewed as an

informant for the older Dahl. This highly crafted narrative demonstrates specific choices made by older Dahl to select and discard information as it pertained to the stories he wished to have remembered.

It is clear that time distorted Dahl's memories in *Going Solo*. His own reliance on his letters to write *Going Solo* is obvious since he chose to include transcriptions from eighteen of these letters in the book. Even so, the largest written portion of *Going Solo* is dedicated to a time period when few letters were written -- the three months he spent fighting the Axis forces. This last half of the book shows a shift in the stories he tells where he comes to rely on historical touchstones. It is full of places and people which evoke memories and strong feelings for him. Photos and vivid pictures of the places he fought help him to make the connection to the past even stronger.

Time is not the only thing which is distorted in *Going Solo*. The most traumatic event in Dahl's life was the crash of his airplane resulting in life-long physical pain. By the time Dahl wrote *Going Solo*, the tale of the crash had become a well-rehearsed part of his life. In this re-written version, he is able to place the blame on others for both the crash and miscommunications that made readers believe his plane was shot down. The book demonstrates that his motivations and fears had changed as well between the time when the letters and *Going Solo* were written. In letters, young Dahl seemed most concerned with the speed of his return to active duty and overcoming the melancholy associated with his slow recovery. In contrast, the older Dahl places stories of potential love, possible blindness, and poor treatment of female hospital workers in *Going Solo* which show us how human frailty and mortality were pervasive in his thoughts toward the end of his life.

Dahl's skill as a raconteur focused on tales of known war heroes and the locations of famous battles in his narrative. The people he included, such as David Coke and Flight-Lieutenant Pat Pattle, added a level of credibility and truthfulness to his tales. Characters and themes were used selectively to communicate intended messages, and then dismissed to move on to other people and events. In this way, *Going Solo* acts as a narrative of landscape, allowing Dahl to return to the places and times in his life where he experienced the most powerful of emotions. Even the ending of *Going Solo* was re-crafted to permit Dahl to return home at the end of his journey, to the waiting arms of his loving mother.

With this thesis I hope to make scholars – particularly folklorists – aware of Dahl and his contributions to the scholarly canon of literary folktales. By viewing this thesis in the context of folklore, others can approach similar subject matter combining personal letters, literary narrative, and biographical information to gain a more complete picture of influences on narratives. Since tradition is so strongly influenced by memory, this particular approach allows us to see how early personal papers influence later works and to view the role of memory in personal narrative.

Dahl is an immensely popular writer and this thesis contributes to new information on him to the scholarly canon of folklore. It is my hope that other scholars will follow suit and continue to build on any gaps in my research that may exist. Scholar Marie Tatar wonders when "[t]he precise historical juncture at which folktales, in particular fairy tales, transformed themselves from adult entertainment into children's literature" (Tatar 1992, 142). More can be written on Dahl as a crossover writer in this arena, catering to a child and adult audience. His use of parable-like stories to deliver moralistic lessons should be more

deeply explored in his other works as well as those covered in this thesis. Finally, his narratives and their contribution to modern folktales should be examined more fully. Stith Thompson says that the folktale's most lasting feature is that "[t]he teller of a folktale . . . . is proud of his ability to hand on that which he has received" (Thompson 1977, 4). If Dahl is seen as a teller of literary folktales, then the values and assumptions he embedded in his stories should be looked at more closely to see how they influence future generations.

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